

The Law of Love – Romans 13:8-14 – September 10, 2017

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As we're still trying to wrap our minds around the devastation wrought by Hurricane Harvey and the floods that followed and decimated Houston and much of that coastal area, we see images of the wildfires that have seemingly taken over the western United States, consuming the forests along the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon, we see the destruction in Mexico from a powerful earthquake, and we await the outcome of Hurricane Irma's path over Florida, a storm that has flattened much of the Caribbean. When we think of flooding, drought, excessive heat, and fires worldwide, our minds can get overwhelmed.

We hear about groups such as our own Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Agency who stand on the front lines along with others, ready to go when tragedy strikes. We can't imagine those groups not being to help in times of crisis. Responding to others in need is what they do. Not unlike what we are called to do as Christians – we are called to love our neighbors and minister to their needs. And that brings us to Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

Paul had just finished telling his readers to follow the laws of the local government and to submit to their authority. Governments, he told them, are placed by God to establish law and order, and we are to respect and honor the people in authority. Paul then switches his focus to the Law of God, specifically mentioning the commands against adultery, murder, theft and covetousness. These are a list of prohibitions – the these we should NOT do, because they infringe upon the personhood of someone else. Don't commit adultery, because you're violating someone else's spouse. Don't commit murder, because you're taking someone's life. Don't steal, because you're filching the possessions of another. Don't covet your neighbor's property, because it leads to greed, envy and strife between people.

Each one of these refers to negative actions toward another person, otherwise known as your neighbor. Now, if you were to completely avoid associating with other people, it would be technically easy to follow these commandments. It's rather difficult to murder, steal, covet or commit adultery if you choose to live in a world void of other persons. That's it, we should all become hermits!

Jesus summed up the religious law into two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. And that latter teaching is what Paul is drawing on in this passage from the letter to the Romans. Paul says, "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law...Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." This "law of love" then is something different than the commandments. The commandments that Paul mentions in his letter tell us what not to do. The law of love tells what we should do. See the difference?

The law of love is not a set of prohibitions, listing those actions we should avoid taking that would disrupt the lives of our neighbors. Instead, the law of love is a command for how we should be interacting with our neighbors.

And here's where things get a little tricky. We should take a moment to recognize what love is and what love isn't. When it comes to the New Testament usage of the word love – the Greek word "agape" - it carries a meaning that goes far beyond the touchy-feely romanticism that our Hollywood saturated brains have come to understand. Love isn't a warm fuzzy feeling. It has nothing to do with emotionalism. It isn't sentimental. It does not mean feeling sympathetic for the plight of others. Love is a call to action.

Scholar Paul Achtemeier said this, "to love someone is actively to promote that person's good." (*Interpretation "Romans,"* p. 209) So when we are called to love our neighbor, it has nothing to do with how we feel about that person. It does not mean we change our emotional state. Nor does it mean that we should intentionally avoid them. No. The love for neighbor that Jesus described, is to actively promote that person's good. To make life better for them. To recognize their needs and not just sympathize with their situation, but to actually do something to change it for the better.

Tragic situations always bring to the forefront the desire to respond in whatever way we can. We see it already with the desire to help people following Harvey and Irma's destruction. Every time we are confronted by a disaster, natural or otherwise, people want to respond. Human beings seem to have an innate desire to take action when confronted by horrific examples of destruction and human suffering.

But I wonder if the law of love that Jesus calls us to follow has an even deeper expectation.

Disasters seem to be a call to action. They are a blatant example of need – generally plastered on our television and smart phone screens. Everyone wants to help. And truly this is an example of following the law of love. Reaching out to others in their time of greatest need. But I think sometimes the big news items overshadow the darkness of need that pervades our world every day. The big ticket emergencies sometimes cause us to overlook the ongoing needs of our world and our neighborhoods. There are people who live in squalor and lack basic human necessities every day, week in and week out.

Over time, we grow immune to the crisis, especially if it is ongoing, and we turn our attention to the next big thing, generally focusing on whatever is closest to us. It's easy to help out when the crisis hits, but we generally don't stay in it for the long haul.

I think the command to love our neighbors as ourselves is one of the most radical and difficult commands Jesus could have given us. It was easier when the religious law was just a list of prohibitions about what not to do that would infringe on the rights of others. A sort of hands-off approach – don't mess with other people's stuff.

But as Jesus reinterpreted the law, it is a call to action, a call to actively promote the well-being of others. What does that mean? How much are we expected to do? How involved are we supposed to get? Those are really difficult questions. But maybe for each of us a place to start is this – give till it hurts.

Give of yourself until it starts getting uncomfortable, and then push a bit more. And remember, it's not just about money. Certainly it's good to give money. But we have many resources, much more than just dollars and cents. There are opportunities to volunteer, to give of our time. We can use our talents to make a difference. Every one of us is good at doing at least one thing.

What are the things come naturally for you? Do you love animals? Then consider volunteering at the Humane Society. Do you love children? What about serving as an after-school mentor or teach in our Sunday School. Do you get along well with older folks? Consider spending time visiting people at an assisted living facility. Do you have a passion for ending hunger or homelessness or domestic violence? Perhaps advocacy is one of your strengths. There are lots of places that could use your time and skills. Maybe you like to send letters or cards, maybe you have a skill for knitting or crafts, maybe you like to bake, maybe you know how to build things. There is a neighbor in this world that could benefit from each one of us and our unique skills and knowledge.

All of us are already giving of ourselves. But maybe we've grown a little bit comfortable. So now we can challenge ourselves to give a little more, to push just a little farther, to reach out to a few more neighbors. Loving our neighbors is risky. It calls us to leap out of our zones of comfort – to give of our time, our treasure, and our talents. It challenges us to reach out to people who are different than we are – people who don't always say thank you, people who may not appreciate our efforts. But we're not in this for a pat on the back. Anytime we minister to another person, it's as if we are ministering to Jesus Christ. When we give someone water to drink, or food to eat, or clothes to wear, it's as if we're giving it to Christ. Anytime we practice the law of love, Jesus Christ is there.

But this law of love doesn't just apply to us as individuals. It also applies to us as a church. What can we do as a community of faith to reach out to our neighbors? Are there ways we can support others who are oppressed and marginalized? Are the things we can do to advocate on their behalf? So as a church, how can we respond? Those are valid questions for us to explore.

Practicing the law of love is not easy. But I challenge each one of us, to consider what this command really means – for us as individuals and for us as a community of faith. Remember, every person in this world was created in the image of God. Every person in this world is our neighbor. And the command of Jesus - that command to love neighbor as ourselves has linked us all together. Every encounter with another person is an opportunity to put the law of love into action.