

MOVING TOWARD PEACE

Psalm 19, OT p. 498
Romans 13:8-10, NT p. 162
Matthew 19:16-22, NT p. 21

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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Paul says we should owe nothing to anyone. It's obvious he didn't live in the 21st century. We owe money to the mortgage company or the landlord. We owe money on our credit cards. We owe time and attention to family and work and church. We feel as though we have a lot of obligations, and we do. But Paul is making a very important claim – our most important debt is the debt of love. Owe no one anything except love. That is the only requirement, the only thing to be concerned with, he says, for love fulfills the law.

The basic Jewish laws were the ten commandments. We've been hearing the story of the Exodus and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, with the promised land as their destination. On the way, God gave Moses commandments on Mt. Sinai, also called Mt. Horeb. Two versions of these laws are found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The ten commandments, like the rest of the story of ancient Israel, were recited for generations before they were written down. They were almost certainly a combination of religious customs and ethical guidelines, with some wording added later, when they were living in settled towns. For instance, it doesn't make much sense to tell people on a wilderness journey not to covet a neighbor's house. Yet by their experience they knew the law to be God's good gift. Psalm 19 expressed their joy for all the ways the Lord had spoken to them, in nature and by the spoken word.

In the time of Jesus, faithful Jews still respected the commandments, though many more had been added, and very few could actually keep them fully. Still, the religious leaders spent a lot of time discussing the law of Moses. Jesus refused to get into their arguments over interpretation of the commandments. He knew God's ultimate purpose. He reminded people over and over again that there was something more important than keeping the letter of the law. When Jesus looked at the rich young man, when he listened to his question, Jesus understood that this man was focused on doing what is right, to benefit his own standing with God. So Jesus confronted this successful young man with his basic problem. He had neglected the heart of the commandments, which is to be in relationship with God and neighbor. He had ignored the needs of the poor, while congratulating himself on his own discipline in doing what God required. The command to share with the poor runs throughout Scripture. How could this rich man have missed it? Yet he was shocked when Jesus said, "This applies to you!" He went away sad, for he could not give up his dependence on himself and his possessions. And people went cold and hungry that night because of his decision.

Jesus didn't say in so many words that the rich man wasn't showing love for God and neighbor, but the implication is there. "Sell what you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me." Sometimes we get never get past discussing whether Jesus would say that to us, and we always decide no, that was a special circumstance. But I do think that

the story has implications for us. Forget your own stuff, Jesus might say to us. Forget your own baggage, whatever that might be. Leave behind your things, your worries, your entertainment – and go out to serve others. That is love in action.

We have many opportunities to do that. If you're a hands-on person, maybe you cook or serve or clean up at Community Meals, or maybe you drive for Meals on Wheels or help serve at the Senior Center. Or maybe you do all of those. What you're doing is love in action. Thank you.

Maybe you're a good listener, so you make phone calls or visits, or even stop in the middle of the aisle at the grocery store to give quiet support to someone who is troubled. Maybe you invite a friend to lunch so they can talk. No one will know that you're doing it, except that person and God. That is love in action. Thank you.

Maybe you have a strong sense of what is right, and a way of speaking that truth in love. I think of the story of the Quaker farmer back east, in the 1800's, who firmly believed that slavery was wrong and should be abolished. In keeping with his Quaker ways, he visited his neighbors, one by one, and talked gently about abolition. His quiet courage had a major effect on his community. When we speak and act for those our society ignores and devalues, that is love in action.

Maybe you have the gift of insight, so that you see creative possibilities in a quiet teenager, and you encourage them to try something they hadn't considered. Or you see opportunities for us as a church to be involved in our community in a new way, and you encourage us to look beyond the obstacles toward a place of service. That is love in action. And there are many other active ways to express God's love every day.

Now, one disclaimer. We can go overboard with this and get too busy. I went to seminary at a time when pastoral self-care was a huge topic. I think it came up in at least four classes. Churches were being sued over clergy misconduct, so self-awareness and self-care were considered to be an antidote to that. We need to take care of our own needs, especially our spiritual and social needs, in order to serve others effectively. That applies to all of us, not just the pastor, and not just to prevent misconduct. It is for our own spiritual health and for the health of our part of Christ's family. I take spiritual retreat days for that reason. They give me some uninterrupted time so that I can listen for God's word to me, outside of preparing for a sermon; so that I can open my own heart to the strengthening touch of the Spirit; so that I can become aware of opportunities that I might not have noticed or welcomed without time to spend in silent reflection. This is one way I am strengthened to share the love and care of God. I hear from time to time that a member is taking a "sabbatical" from heavy responsibilities here at the church. Good for you! (As long as you don't disappear completely or all go at once.) We do need to re-evaluate what we're doing personally, and whether it is effective and life-giving. Those quiet times of reflection and prayer enable us to return to the work God has called us to do.

The ways we put God's love into action will differ depending on our abilities and opportunities, and will change over the course of our own lives. I hope each one of us will continue to be open to the Spirit's call, and will speak up when we have an idea for sharing God's love that the church can help accomplish.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are reminded once more that we aren't spiritual Lone Rangers. We're in this together. Around the world, while it was still yesterday here, our brothers and sisters in Christ began to gather around many different tables. In Australia and China, India and Iraq, in Russia and Italy and South Africa, in Brazil and Mexico, in churches large and small and in the open air, those who follow Christ have given thanks at the Lord's table for the One who showed us what self-giving love is like, the One who welcomes us into life-giving love. As we come to this table, may we give thanks for Christ's love. May we be strengthened to let go of ourselves in order to share that love with our world.

Let us pray. God of love, you have shown us what we need to do. Give us willing hearts and hands to share your love and peace wherever we are. Amen.