

Sermon, September 10, 2023

Romans 13: 8-14

“Love as the Fulfillment of Life”

Just as a reminder - Paul's letter to the church in Rome is a bit different than his other letters where he wrote to churches that he had helped found or spent time with. When he wrote this letter he had never been to that church, but it was sort of a letter of introduction to them and has the most systematic explanation of his theology. He would eventually get to Rome on his way to spread the gospel in Spain , but he would be executed by the Roman authorities before he could get to Spain.

In this part of the letter, he lays out how very central love is to the Christian faith. In the first paragraph he mentions how the great commandments are wrapped up in loving our neighbors - and in loving ourselves. In the 12th chapter he gives specific instructions, saying, “ Let love be genuine: hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers”. ( When he refers to the saints, he is not speaking of those who are particularly holy, but is simply talking about members of the church in general.

Now, it is important to understand what Paul is referring to when he speaks of love. In the modern era, through movies, novels, music, etc., the meaning of love has been somewhat distorted. They tend to define love as having to do with sentimentality, deep emotional and romantic feelings. There is nothing wrong with those things. They can play a part in love, but in the New Testament the meaning of love has to do not with emotions or feelings, but it is expressed through actions. When Jesus healed lepers and gave sight to the blind, or when he offered wisdom teaching, those were expressions of love. When we donate to the Neighborhood Center, that is an expression of Christian love. Love is about care - care for those that Jesus called the least of these, care for our neighbor whether near or far, and care for ourselves, tending to our own physical, emotional, and spiritual life.

When Jesus says that we are to love our enemies he is not saying that we have to have warm and fuzzy feelings for them, but to respond in ways different than the world does. Again, returning to chapter 12, Paul writes, “...if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads”. In that last statement about pouring burning coals on the heads of one's enemies, he is not talking about an act of vengeance. He's actually quoting from the Book of Proverbs., (25:22) in

the words of biblical scholar , Paul Achtemieer, “When he speaks of caring for an enemies needs which heaps coals of fire on the enemy’s head, he is not giving advice on a better way to get back at one’s enemies! Rather, such treatment is intended to get the enemy to turn from enmity to friendship. Gracious deeds thus burn away the hate within”. In other words, it’s about overcoming evil with good. This was at the heart of the non-violent campaigns of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

In verse 11 of today’s reading Paul insists that, “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.” Here he is referring to the Second coming of Christ. It was a common belief in Paul’s day that Jesus would be returning very soon. Jesus, himself, had said that the kingdom of God would come before that generation would die. Obviously, that did not happen. Two thousand years later there are those who claim to know that it is coming very soon. Pay no attention! They are claiming to know something that Jesus, himself, said he did not know. But as I have said before, there is a sense where Jesus does return in each generation when as the Body of Christ acts in a caring and loving manner in the world. We bear witness to the coming kingdom through acts of love.

If we were to read further into chapter 14, we would find Paul talking about the importance of not judging others. This echoes Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount- “ Do not judge , so that you may not be judged”. Paul also writes in chapter 2 of Romans - “ Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself...”. You may remember a comedy troupe in the 60’ called Firesign Theater, and the title of one of their albums was “ I Think We are All Bozos on This Bus”. That’s kind of a comical way of echoing Paul’s expression that we all fall short of the glory of God. We are all guilty of sin in one way or another, therefore we are in no position to judge others - and choosing not to judge others is also an act of love.

Finally, Paul describes love as the fulfillment of the law. He is talking about Judaic law as expressed in the Torah, but if you think about it, based on some of what I have said this morning - love is also the fulfillment of life! - Amen.

**Let us pray:** O God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, age after age we wait upon you and find that of your faithfulness there is no end and that your care is unending. We praise you for the mystery of our life which is a mystery of infinite goodness. We praise you for the order and constancy of nature, for the beauty and bounty of the earth. We thank you for all the comfort and joy of life, for our homes, for our friends, and for the love you

have for us. Help us to mirror that love in all that we say and do. Bless those with special needs and remind them of your never ending love...Amen.