

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 119: 33-40
SECOND LESSON: Romans 13: 8-14
September 6, 2020

“Loving Our Neighbor”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

I remember when my niece Rebecca was an under-graduate and decided to major in geology. “Geology?” I asked her. “Why on earth do you want to study geology?” As far as I knew, at that point we had no other scientists in the family, although we do now have a doctor. Rebecca looked at me point blank and said, “Rocks don’t talk back.” Good point. As far as conflict is concerned, we will never have an argument with a rock.

Paul says we are to clear our debts as soon as possible—except for one debt—a debt that can never clear—and that is our responsibility to love one another. And this love is not just for other Christians. It’s not just for our spouse, children, parents or other family members. This is love for our neighbor. This is that tough kind of love for those we often don’t even like. This is love for people with whom we are having an argument, for people with whom we disagree, for people on the opposite side of all our political debates and cultural divides. Dare I say it, this is love for all those people at the gym that I have had heated arguments with over their not wearing masks properly. Wearing a mask on your chin is not wearing a mask, people!

Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law, and he then goes on to list those commandments that deal directly with our relationships with other people. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not covet. These seem like extreme examples, but they all have less severe forms. Flirting with someone we’re not married to, character assassination in the form of gossip, rationalizing being less than honest in our finances, and focusing our thoughts on what we want that we don’t have, all count. In the chapter immediately preceding this one Paul wrote: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12: 17-21)

This instruction, to show love towards ALL, even those we really don’t like is one of the most challenging. But it is important for us to remember that Paul was not speaking about emotions, but about actions. Agape love is not the kind of love that makes us feel like we are floating on clouds. It’s not romantic love, which is largely hormonally driven and temporary. A young couple in the

thralls of passionate love will feel that nothing could ever separate them. But in a year, those feelings will be 50% less, and in five years they'll be gone. If true love, real, deep genuine love has not taken its place, that marriage more often than not will fail. Real love is a deep and constant force. Real love acts in the best interests of the other person, whether they like it or not.

This is the other tricky thing about love. God is asking us to love our neighbor with agape, or pure benevolent love. That means to act in our neighbor's best interest. But to act in another person's best interest does not mean to do whatever that person wants. To act in a drug addict's best interest does not mean to give them more drugs. It means to try to get them into rehab. Any parent knows that to act in a child's best interest does not mean to give them whatever they want. And the fact is, that child of ours is going to try really hard to manipulate us into giving in and not enforcing bedtimes, meal times, school work and sharing with others. But we all know what kind of monster giving in produces. Acting in someone's best interest is hard. We don't even always act in our own best self-interest, especially when it comes to doing things that are difficult! Agape love requires thought, prayer and a lot of self-discipline. People will sometimes try to manipulate, bully, whine, and argue circles around us. To exercise agape love towards our neighbor requires us to be deliberative, to take a step back, slow down, and think. Just as a parent has to think about what is in the best interest of the child and then carry it out even if it is difficult (which parenting inevitably is), God wants us to stop and think about what is in the best interest of *everyone*.

"Everyone? But we don't have time for that!" we say. We're being constantly pummeled by new information and demands. The world tries to force us into side-stepping critical thinking. *Do this now, buy that immediately, get what you want when you want it, post an answer to an attack online, fight back! React!* But the Holy Spirit says, STOP. Breathe. Think. Pray. God wants us to act, not to react. This runs totally counter to our consumer driven society and our politically explosive environment. It's also the way out and through the problems we face. We're put under pressure to make up our minds about things instantly so that we will not have time to think. Life can sometimes feel like those really lame TV ads that try to pressure us by saying, "Call in the next 10 minutes . . ." It's a lie. We must resist this pressure. We do not have to jump when the world says jump. We do not have to react every time someone pokes us. We can step back, pray, think, and respond as God would want us to respond, responsibly and lovingly.

Paul's sense of urgency about living right had to do with time. He felt that the Lord might be returning at any moment. Obviously, God's sense of time and ours is considerably different! And yet from another point of view, the words apply with equal power. It is time to throw off darkness and put on the armor of light. We have to put on the armor of light to keep the darkness at bay. We can expect there to be battle in life. We can expect a lifelong struggle against evil. It is fascinating to me that in my absence both Heather and Cass preached on love and the armor of God. God is speaking the same word. We must put on the armor of light and live according to love, because our nation is at a turning point. We are more vulnerable to division and chaos now than few other times in our history. We must BE as Christ in the world right now. When

hateful words are flying, when lies are being spread, when people are dying of a terrible contagious virus and violence and racism are tearing at the fabric of our lives, we must show the love of Christ and the nature of God **in person**. This is the way to be a stabilizing force of grace and healing in our society. Preaching won't do it. Political rhetoric won't do it. Love is the only answer, and it is a hard answer. It is hard, but it is possible, through Christ.

A community of people who love one another, a place where honesty, decency, grace and forgiveness abound, is a safe place in a dark world. And we can provide such a safe place. We can be that light on a hill. We can remain steady when everything is in turmoil. And we can love others as Christ loves us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Psalm 119: 33-40

- 33** Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees,
that I may follow it to the end.
- 34** Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.
- 35** Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.
- 36** Turn my heart toward your statutes
and not toward selfish gain.
- 37** Turn my eyes away from worthless things;
preserve my life according to your word.
- 38** Fulfill your promise to your servant,
so that you may be feared.
- 39** Take away the disgrace I dread,
for your laws are good.
- 40** How I long for your precepts!
In your righteousness preserve my life.

Romans 13: 8-14

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.**9** The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." **10** Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. **12** The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. **13** Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. **14** Rather,

clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.