

Romans 13:8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another 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 any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Sermon Message for September 6, 2020
Pleasant Street UMC and St. Luke's UMC
Pastor Ben Daggett

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” God is love; God is perfect love. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We have heard these words, some of us, so many times, that maybe they have lost the sheer force of their significance. But to rest with them, wrestle with them, really marinate in them, is to marvel at how revolutionary and transformative these words from the Bible really are.

Today we will explore what the Bible teaches about putting God's perfect love into practice, and working through conflict with our brothers and sisters who are on this Christian journey with us. The church, we the church, have an opportunity, perhaps more today than at any other time prior to this, to make Jesus known to a world beset with troubles and destructive conflict. And this is our high calling as believers: “To know Christ and make him known.”

Jesus, in response to a question as to which is the greatest commandment in the Law, says this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and all your strength, and its corollary: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” These teachings, one right next to the other, show us that the measure of our fellowship with God is the quality of relationship with our brothers and sisters. Hear me well, “the greatest measure of our fellowship with God is the quality of relationship with our brothers and sisters, with those closest to us.”

In the book of John we read, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And how did Jesus love? Last week we explored denying ourselves, picking up our cross and following him as the entry point to the Christian journey. Humility. “It’s not about me, my rights, my will, my way,” but rather, letting go of that hard, unyielding self to move through life in full trust that God is good, come what may, and God is working a plan through my life, in covenantal grace. No matter how bleak our outward circumstances may seem, God is always good. In his humanity, Jesus offers the example of this perfect trust in the Father’s goodness, displaying God’s divinity through his human brokenness, carrying out the Father’s will to reveal love to its fullest extent, right into death and beyond, to resurrection life. Jesus’ obedience in this regard reveals that love is, indeed, more powerful than the grave. So for us, however cloudy it is right now, God is always faithful, and Jesus is always victorious. His victory, however, is not how victory looks in earthly terms, where so often it’s a zero-sum gain, as we looked at a couple of weeks ago: “If I win, you lose, you win, I lose.” Within the Kingdom of God, or Jesus’ Reign as Messiah, we look to live into something far greater, far more beautiful, where God’s love is made tangible in ways that bless all who receive it, know it, and rejoice in it to their transformation and newness of life.

Our text from Matthew this week states: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone,” and then there is laid out a whole process for settling disputes. Pointing out another’s fault is delicate work, but as folks who have professed Jesus as our Lord and endeavor to let perfect love guide every dimension of our lives, we can do nothing less. Accountability is inevitable, as we, imperfect humans, walk together in trust before a perfectly loving and patient God, as we see God manifest in the life and Spirit of Christ. And, in this context, accountability is an act of love, born of a desire for the very best for the one who has strayed from love’s path.

I wonder, for some of you, if you have a hard time with the language I just used, that of “Jesus is Lord”. I know I did for a long time. In our day, the word “Lord” is loaded with all kinds of baggage. Perhaps for you it’s heavy with patriarchal, or even class assumptions, or the word “lord” rings with all-too familiar phrases like, “Because I said so,” and maybe even, “Do as I say, not as I do,” or any number of the many ways that authority gets expressed in unloving and painful ways, in the world’s terms. “Don’t ‘lord’ your opinion over me!” The word “lord” can be very hurtful and unhelpful, for some.

So let’s look, briefly, at the lordship of Christ in terms the Bible sets forth for us, to then discuss conflict with our fellow humans. And before we think about going to our brother or sister with a complaint about their conduct, let’s consider how Jesus understands and expresses lordship in the Bible’s stories. From Matthew 20:25-28, we read, “But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus’ authority, his lordship is made clear in service, and sacrificial love.

The book *The Calvary Road* will guide us again this week, in our consideration of these ideas. In Colossians 3:15 we read: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” The word “rule” might grate on us in similar ways to “lord,” but in the original Greek, the word here translated as “to rule” is “to be an umpire, or referee.” In our journey with Christ, then, the peace of God is to be the referee in our hearts. We all know what happens in football, basketball, or soccer when the referee, who is supposed to be impartial, blows the whistle: it’s time to stop play, identify the infraction, regroup, and apply the requisite penalty to resume fair play, which often means giving one team a gain or loss in yardage, or depending on the

game, a free kick or free throw. In our relationship with God, when we find that the perfect peace of Christ has somehow been disturbed, we can understand that to mean that the referee has blown the whistle. It's time to "stop play," meaning, slow down, breathe, pray, and ask God about where the perfect peace of Christ was disrupted, and why. Generally the "infraction" to carry our sports metaphor is either with God or with someone else, and often it's with both. Something needs to be addressed between us and God.

Here our Methodist heritage can remind us of the class meetings among the early adherents of the Wesleyan movement, where the first question they asked one another was: "How is it with your soul?" and the participants would confess those sins that God had brought to their attention over the course of the week. And this confession one to another, before God, was a joyous occasion, since the brothers and sisters could then enjoy the purity of a clean conscience in their fellowship, free in their interactions, and cleansed by Jesus' blood. Jesus, whose love was secure and whose forgiveness assured, not only in word, but in the lived experience and deeds of his followers. 1 John 1:5-10 reads, "5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

God loves both us and our brother or sister perfectly. So often, when we experience painful things at the hands of our brothers or sisters, we are not inclined to express or live out of that perfect love from that point on. Jesus, however, laid down his life to display this perfect love of God. And this is

the part that is so compelling about the lordship of Christ in our hearts, a reign which is rooted and grounded in love. If we are out of step with perfect love, not only will our peace with God be impacted, but there is something between us and God that the Spirit of God is calling us to address.

I would like to use myself as an example here, but maybe not in the way you're thinking. Here I'll be describing my journey with Christ as the one confronted in my sin. I have a companion in Christ who has walked a good part of life's path with me, who has endured quite a bit of me, and who knows me in some ways, I would say, probably even better than I know myself. This person was following the course of action laid out here in Matthew 18: "If a brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone," but I did not want to hear it. I didn't like the way the words came across, didn't like the tone of voice of the one bearing the message. I felt disrespected and misunderstood, felt I didn't deserve to be spoken to that way. Never mind the glaring sin that was causing this person pain, or even the pain it was causing, I was too caught up in the way it was brought to my attention, that I refused to hear anything else.

In preparation for last week's message, however, I found myself turning Matthew's words over in my mind, again and again, where he quotes Jesus as saying to the disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Well, I want to follow Jesus, but deny myself? Yes, says the Bible. And in so doing follow Christ. Christ renounces every right he has to earthly glory, taking on the form of a slave to display the radically self-emptying, extravagantly humble, self-effacing love of God. In considering my response to this confrontation, I could see so clearly that I was a long way from Christ. And there were so many layers to it, as I went before God about it in prayer: pride, self-justification, judging the other person for being "unloving." That last one was the plank in my own eye that most prevented me from seeing anything,

and we still haven't even reached the sin that was causing this person pain, my sin ... but ... speaking with all of you this way each week has a powerful way of bringing me to the breaking point. You see, I really want to live out this Christian life, and when preaching last week's sermon on self denial, on brokenness before God and others, I was preaching to myself to a large extent. To understand the perfect love of God I must deny myself, must die to those thoughts and attitudes that seek to exalt myself, to that inclination to hang out in self-pity and resentment, and the presumption of my own righteousness, or that I don't "deserve" to be treated a certain way.

This is a hard truth to swallow, and it's one that is easily misunderstood or distorted, because I'm not telling you that you have no rights, or that you should endure mistreatment. Taken from anyone but Jesus, this injunction to self-denial can only be some kind of manipulation. But then we see Jesus, who walked this very path himself and expected nothing less of his followers, and called it the only truly victorious life. Ok, I thought, what does "dying to my rights" mean in this context? I have no rights. Suddenly, not only was the sin in question laid bare, which my companion had long been seeking to bring to my attention, but a whole host of other unloving, judgmental, self-centered, self-exalting attitudes came to light as well. When I understood that I had no rights, just as Jesus let go of his, there came a piercing clarity from the Holy Spirit that I had a lot more to confess than the original thing brought before me. AND I could begin to see that it was God's perfect love working through the other person to bring all of this to light. After talking about it, we are walking in new freedom that hadn't been there before, to large extent because of all the walls of self I had built up to defend "my rights." I have the sense that there may be more layers to work through. We are all works in progress. But God.

Brothers and sisters, beloved in Christ, all this is to say our fellowship with one another is precious, and expectant with the promise of Christ. Here within us, among us, in our daily tasks, in our work and leisure, in our Zoom meetings, in our socially-distanced reunion as a church, and our planned

gatherings for the weeks to come, we are all offered the promise of newness of life in Christ. But it is a walk of humility, of brokenness, of trust in God's unfailing love as we see displayed in our Lord. So to close I'll ask you: how, this week, can you demonstrate the sacrificial, self-emptying love of Christ to those around you, those closest to you, to those maybe whom you don't even like? And remember, while it may be counter-intuitive, letting go of your claim to your rights, in other words, to your self-centeredness may just be the way to freedom and New Life! I'm speaking as a one who has received correction and discipline in this particular area, in all humility of heart and earnest appeal for what truly heals and restores! It's a commitment, a sacrifice, it's determination in the moment to entrust your life to Christ, by faith, to God's everlasting goodness.