

Romans 13, verses 8-14. Loving Neighbor. Sept. 6, 2020

“Love your neighbor as yourself”, we are urged by Paul in our lesson from Romans today. And in so saying, he’s actually quoting Jesus, who was actually quoting some Old Testament verses. There is a long Biblical tradition that urges us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Thinking about this in a rather literal way, for me and Phil, this has been easy. We essentially have no neighbors, even though we live on the corner of 52<sup>nd</sup> Ave. E. and Norwood Street in Lakeside. The street is our neighbor to the west. The house across the street to the north has been mysteriously unoccupied for years since the owner died. The house behind us to the south is quite a distance away and there’s our large detached garage and some trees between our house and their’s. And the closest house to us, our neighbor to the south, is a pleasant, older guy who’s never around, but always away at his cabin. Quite honestly, it’s like having no neighbors right up close and personal, and that’s made it pretty easy to love our literal neighbors. However, this is about to change. We just learned that the older guy in the house to the south of us is renting out his house to four male UMD students this fall. One more time: four male college students. I did not receive this news with joy. Concern and alarm would be the better words for my reaction. Will they be noisy, disrespectful, rowdy and messy? Will they be all of my worst stereotypes of male college students come to life? Only time will tell. But suddenly, it seems much harder to love my neighbor as myself. I mean, some neighbors are a lot *easier* to love than others, isn’t that right? We’ve been assured that a strict set of rules for conduct has been laid down for these four students, but who knows how that will go? How good are the rules, and who is going to enforce them? And those are the very questions that people have

struggled with for centuries and millennia as they try to figure out how to live harmoniously and well with others. Who makes the rules? Are they good rules? How will they be enforced?

The people of Paul and Christ's time, for example, lived in a very rule-oriented, legalistic society. They had accumulated more and more laws each year of their long history. Their laws governed matters we might consider both civil and religious, down to even the smallest details of life. For example, there were laws that specified how many steps you could take on the Sabbath, or what foods were appropriate to eat and how they should be prepared. Some people took great pride in diligently obeying each and every law. On the other hand, many people wished that the law was a bit simpler. They wanted a kind of Readers Digest Condensed version of the law. In fact, they wanted just a single general principle that they could apply to most life situations. Remember the Gospel story about the lawyer who asked Jesus which commandment was the most important to obey? And the lawyer's question was not new; it had been an area of debate for centuries before Jesus was born. Several hundred years earlier, for example, Rabbi Hillel was asked by a mischievous student if he could summarize the totality of the law into a single commandment while balancing on one leg. Not to be outdone, the wily Rabbi stood on one leg and replied, "What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor." All the ideas of those respected teachers who had weighed in on this question of the single greatest law had become part of the on-going debate. If you recall, Jesus tells the lawyer that he should love the Lord with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and he should love his neighbor as himself. Both of these commandments which Jesus quotes are from the Old Testament. Jesus isn't saying anything new here. In our text this morning, Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul refers to four of the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament, also nothing new, which deal with how we get along

---we shall not commit adultery, we shall not murder, we shall not steal, we shall not covet.

Obedying these sets of laws does indeed help us to get along together and be better and more loving neighbors. But, Paul, like Jesus and Rabbi Hillel and others, believed that rather than memorizing and obeying a long grocery list of laws, we can summarize the spirit of them all quite simply. Like Jesus, Paul believes that the laws that regulate how we should interact can be summarized in the single commandment that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

So then, of course, we must ask ourselves, *how* shall we love our neighbors as ourselves? What would that look like? For one thing, do we love ourselves intelligently enough to be able to love anyone else very well? Furthermore, if my neighbor, as Jesus tells me in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is anyone who needs my help, then I have neighbors all over the world. I don't just have to figure out how to love the four college guys next door, I have to figure out how to love all of these people in need everywhere. And here's the kicker---I have to do this loving-neighbor-thing right now under circumstances that confuse the issue immensely. Consider with me these three factors:

\*We are living within a global pandemic which makes every decision exponentially harder than it used to be. It used to be that we loved our neighbors by providing a shoulder for them to cry on, or giving them a comforting hug, or sitting with them and listening to them quietly tell us their troubles. We can't do any of that right now. We can't share quiet confidences because we can't hear anyone through their masks, and we can't hug and cry and do regular human kinds of things because we have to socially distance. Now we have to love our neighbor by looking out for their welfare by staying away from them and wearing a mask and talking with them over

Zoom, where you're always talking on top of one another, and it's just not the same at all. Every potential opportunity to meet up with someone in person involves a host of practical and ethical questions that even that wily Rabbi Hillel could never have answered while standing on one leg. It's bewildering and headache inducing to love our neighbor right now.

\*And in addition to the pandemic, we're in election season. We are making each other crazy with our differing and strongly held political opinions. Again and again, people say that they literally cannot understand the viewpoint of those who think differently, and that's actually rather concerning. How on earth can we love our neighbor who thinks so remarkably differently than we do about the same things? In fact, it's much easier to dislike our neighbor, give up on our friendship with our neighbor, and quietly—or loudly---loath them from afar. It's complicated to love our neighbor right now.

\*And finally, I'll briefly lift up the reality of racial injustice and strife that has become front and center these last months. How can the privileged and the not-privileged love one another? How can we love a neighbor whose life has been shaped by much more oppressive or destructive forces than our own, simply because of their skin color or ethnicity? And equally important—how can *they* love *us*? And why should they? What is needed to move beyond decades and generations of miserable history? It's a steep climb to love our neighbor right now.

Yet Paul, like Jesus before him, and Jesus, like the prophets of the Old Testament before him, is insistent. We heard read, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law...Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." See, if it was just a matter of having

really just and wise rules and somehow making everyone involved comply with those rules, it would be simple. If the college guys next door simply never make a peep or play loud rap music or block my driveway with their cars, we're golden, right? The difficulty arises when we realize that humanity is simply not capable of making completely just and wise rules and laws, because justice looks different from differing perspectives. Nor are we capable of complying with rules and laws, because it just isn't in us to be perfect and consistent and obedient. Rules and laws are necessary, but they can never completely do the job. So instead, we are left with a much simpler and much harder option: love. Love your neighbor as yourself.

I have no easy answers for how to love our neighbors in such tumultuous times. But I have one thought that may be worth considering; I don't think that we are talking about warm fuzzy love here. I don't think we're talking about loving someone in the context of doing something for another that makes me happy and feel good about myself. No, this is a much higher bar for love. This is love that does no harm to another, that acts as best as possible for the other's welfare, whether or not that makes *us* feel good or loving or happy. So, in relation to the coronavirus, it doesn't make me happy to not hug my 89 year old Dad, but I don't. Because as far as I can tell, that's the loving thing to do right now. Not because it makes either of us feel good, but because it is acting in each other's best interest. And in relation to political polarization, exercising a little self-control in my response to those with whom I vehemently disagree and trying, against all odds, to catch a glimpse of their worldview, will not feel good, but it is likely acting in a way that does no wrong to my neighbor and enhances their welfare. And in relation to racial injustice and strife, this quote from civil rights activist Cornel West might be helpful to consider: "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public." Those

who have suffered injustice don't need so much our empathy or warm fuzzies, but a more just system, which is much harder to achieve.

This seemingly simple lifestyle recommended by Scripture is so much more difficult than we would like it to be. And make no mistake: by narrowing down all those laws and rules into a simple law of love, Jesus and Paul do not make things any easier for us. Not at all. It's a lot easier to try and obey a list of rules than it is to take the high road of love, to be forgiving when you've been hurt, to extend second chances, to welcome someone you're not sure of, to think outside of our comfortable box even though it makes our head hurt. In the midst of our present turmoil, this calling to live by a law of love is a high calling, a difficult challenge, a messy undertaking. But undertake it we must; this is what God, who gives up everything for our sake out of love, calls us to do---love our neighbors. Amen.