

SEPTEMBER 7TH, 2014

Chapter 13 of Romans has been used in many ways throughout the centuries. It is important therefore to understand this chapter in light of the context of Paul's world. The major contribution of this portion of scripture this morning, within the context of the Rome of Paul's era, lies in the interpretation of the law. There is the understanding of the one debt that is never paid off, and that is the debt of mutual love. This does not mean that the law is not fulfilled but rather that the call to love others on a daily basis is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 13: 8-14

⁸Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. ⁹The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other "don't" you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. ¹⁰You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is *love*.

¹¹But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. ¹²The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. ¹³We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. ¹⁴Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

The reading from Matthew this morning regards the forgiveness of erring church members. This immediately follows the parable of the lost sheep and one wonders if those who refuse to repent are seen as lost? Matthew modifies the idea, found in the early Jewish Christian tradition, that those who refuse to repent are excommunicated and lost to the church. When a person has been excommunicated the church must spare no effort to win them back. Forgiveness is accentuated and all that occurs must be exercised within the context of prayer. Forgiveness, for Matthew is the ultimate example of love and this love must temper the use of power and discipline in the church. Matthew assures the church community that God is with them at all times, through the risen Christ.

Matthew 18: 15-20

¹⁵"If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. ¹⁶If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. ¹⁷If he still won't listen,

tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.

¹⁸“Take this most seriously: A yes on earth is yes in heaven; a no on earth is no in heaven. What you say to one another is eternal. I mean this. ¹⁹When two of you get together on anything at all on earth and make a prayer of it, my Father in heaven goes into action. ²⁰And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I'll be there.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

SERMON – “love, not that easy”

Today's meditation will focus on the passage from Roman that we just heard. From June to now we have seen Romans in each week's lectionary choices, which has given us a chance to make our way through most of this book. Romans is the first epistle in the bible only because when the bible was compiled the letters of Paul were placed beginning with the longest, which happens to be Romans. This is also interesting because Romans is thought to be the last letter that Paul wrote. What is interesting about this letter is that it is not like the other of Paul's letter in that this letter to the Romans does not seem to arise out of any issue or need that Paul wants to address. Rather is book seems to be almost an exposition of Christian Doctrine.

And that is where we come to the reading today. This reading from Romans talks a lot about how we are to act as Christians, what is appropriate and what is not. This is also seems to be another reminder of the Ten Commandments found in the Old Testament. We have don't steal, don't become involved with another's spouse, don't always want what you don't have, yet in the midst of all of this, there is one line that I find to be one of the greatest challenges in the entire bible.

Many of you might know, and then again many of you might not know that I am the only driver in our family and I generally drive Douglas to work every morning, that is of course if I can, which I usually can. Now this usually is a very stressful time for me, I am one of those people that you might say has just a little tiny bit of road rage....yeah I know hard to believe isn't it? But to be honest it is the truth. So as we drive to work we usually listen to this one specific radio station because it has what I feel is the best traffic updates during the morning commute. Other than that I will say, I could care less about this particular station. My educational supervisor asked if what I listened to on the morning commute added to my increasing stress or helped me to relax. In thinking about it I suppose it actually adds to my stress, but of course I need to stay tuned to that station because it is imperative for me to know what is happening on the drive to work, isn't it? But then just over a week ago I heard something that when I heard it seemed so simple and yet can be one of the most difficult things for us to do. They were having a contest to win tickets to a concert and they were asking people to phone in and pass on a piece of advice that they wish they could give their younger selves.

One woman phoned in and she said that the one piece of advice she wished she could have given herself when she was younger is that, “the only person you really need to have like you, is yourself!” It is so simple and yet so profound.

In the reading from Romans Paul tells those he is writing to, to love others just as they love themselves. I question why this passage is worded this way. Is it because we know there are times in our lives when we don't much like ourselves, let alone love ourselves?

I was at Rendez-vous, a national gathering of United Church youth and young adults and one of the theological reflections that was given to these young people opened my eyes to how pervasive this idea of not liking oneself can be. On the Friday evening, the person who was giving the reflection was talking about being beloved and so he talked about how there were people present who although strived to be the best, could never seem to measure up, they always felt “less than,” but they needed to know they were beloved. He continued with there are those present who although try their hardest at sports, always seemed to be picked last, yet they need to know they were beloved and then there are those who look in the mirror and hate what they see, they need to know they are beloved.

These were difficult words for a young person to hear and the results were a number of pastoral care interactions, but in reality this is the truth for so many. I had a phone conversation with a young man this past week, who keeps being told that he is stupid and he struggles not to believe it about himself, and yet it can be so easy. Sometimes it is easier to believe those bad things about ourselves than it is to believe the good stuff. It seems that today we live in a world where it is really hard to love ourselves. We are constantly inundated with messages that tell us we need to be thinner, we need to be in better shape, we need to have a better job, a better house and a better life and all the problems that come along with this, overwork, eating disorders, obesity. It is a challenge.

Yet what does all this mean to us. If we go back to Genesis we hear that at the beginning of creation, when God made man and woman, they were made in God's image. We have the divine within us, to love ourselves we need to recognize that we are made by God to be as we are.

Yes, we can be broken people and yet in the midst of that brokenness we are loved by God and God's grace is constantly sent down upon us. We come together to place like this, places of worship, as we struggle to live as God want us to live.

We come to this place, a place where we learn to see God within each and every one of us. You will hear the anthem in a moment, “Love Grows Here,” very fitting for this morning, and there is one line that I want to quote, “For God is near, teaching us to care, and showing our hearts how to sing.” Our hearts can truly learn to sing as we see God in ourselves and those around us, even in our brokenness, God is within. When we love ourselves we love what God has made.

We are loved by God, we will soon come to the table, invited to share in God's love for each and every one of us. This open table invites us in, even in our brokenness, bringing us closer to God.

We are challenged to love others as we love ourselves. But first we must love ourselves. We are challenged then to see God within, and the love of God within. We may never get rid of our negative self-talk, that internal critic that believes some of those

bad things we hear about ourselves, that holds ourselves to those unrealistic ideals, but if we begin to see God within, it can help us to learn to love who we are as God made, God-given people.

Arianna Huffington, the editor-in-chief of Huffington Post talks about living fearlessly and she posted a number of quotes around living a fearless life and I want to use one now, "We may not be able to tune our inner critics out entirely, but we don't have to let them run the show."

Mahavira, who lived between 540 and 468 BCE and was considered a reformer of Jainism, he spent his later years engaged in meditation, eventually reaching enlightenment and stated the following in regards to living a life of love. "In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self" If we can love ourselves, then we can bring that love we have to others. Personally one of the hardest things I have had to do in my life is to learn to love myself, but knowing that I am God-given, has helped me see the divine within each and every one of us. We are challenged to go out into the world, not just loving those around us, but also truly loving what God has created within each and every one of us. I will end with one last quote from Arianna Huffington, "The first step toward changing the world is to change our vision of the world and of our place in it." Let us view ourselves and the world through the love of God and maybe we can truly change the world. **AMEN**