

The Chicken or the Egg?  
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle  
September 7, 2014

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

**L**ove, love, love. All you need is love. Love is all you need. On this it seems St. Paul and the Beatles agree! But when Saul of Tarsus and John Lennon use the word love, do they mean the same thing? For all its richness and ability to embrace new words the English language attempts far too much with this so-called four letter word! Three thousand years ago the Greeks had agape, eros, philia, and storgē. If the Eskimo can have multiple words for snow or the Masai of East Africa a variety of terms for silence, why can't English display a bit more subtlety and relieve the burden carried by the single word love?! So once again love is the focus and will have to bear the weight of this morning's lesson. And on a first Sunday when we come to the Lord's Table to receive this unparalleled expression of love what could be more appropriate?

The context of our reading from Romans is really rather interesting. The opening verses of chapter 13 begin: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." Paul goes on to say "therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur

judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad." (Romans 13:1-3) Does that characterization surprise you? When you think of Rome and Christians do you think benevolence – or lions and gladiators?! In our own time when we think of governmental authority do we consistently believe they are "not a terror to good conduct, but to bad?" Is that what we think when we reflect on Ferguson, Missouri; the NSA; or beyond our borders Russia or Syria? I don't want to overstate the case but the sad truth is that governments around the world have squandered a lot of good faith in the post war era.

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And the truth is, at the time Paul was writing his great epistle, the Emperor Nero is still some years away from "full crazy" and the religious persecution that Hollywood has so ingrained in our memories. And we also recall that Paul's perspective was somewhat privileged; he was a well-educated, middle-class *Roman* citizen. As we know from the Acts of the Apostles Paul enjoyed a level of protection under Roman law that many of his

colleagues from Galilee did not. And yet, how far is Ferguson or Selma or Montgomery from Jerusalem of the first century? Then as now there were enormous gaps in wealth, justice, education, and opportunity. History is littered with examples of oppressive injustice or dictatorial whim. Would Paul have us believe they too were instituted by God? Or is Paul expressing a more timeless, hope-filled message that the better way to right the wrongs of *any* era is love not insurrection?

At its core Paul is preaching the gospel of love. He seems to be taking a page straight from the synoptic Gospels but of course Paul's letter pre-dates those works. Interestingly, he does not echo the full foundational text that Jesus calls the greatest and first commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:38-40) Does Paul simply presume that every reader of his letter to the church in Rome knows that love of God precedes all else?

What does Paul mean when he says "for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law"? He then goes on to cite specifically the sixth, seventh, eighth, and 10<sup>th</sup> commandments adding "any other commandment" for good measure saying these "are summed up in this word, "love your neighbor as yourself."" This gets at the heart of something we have discussed on many occasions. As the Interpreters Bible puts it; it "probably means not merely the aggregate of its explicit commandments, but rather the *whole of God's will*

for us, much of which cannot be defined in legalistic terms." And that really sums it up doesn't it? You can't legislate goodness. Consequently salvation is not simply a function of obedience to the law. As we quoted Prof. Amy-Jill Levine a few weeks ago: "adherence to the law might prevent you from being bad but it certainly won't ensure that you will be good."

So how does love prevail in a world where we are taught to compete tooth and nail for nearly everything because if we don't someone else will get it instead. We are taught that we live in a time of scarcity; that life is a zero-sum game. And yet . . . we have all had multiple experiences that resoundingly contradict that notion! We know that the greater gift nearly always goes to the giver and not the receiver. We have seen over and over again examples of one person's loving expression that changes the attitude of an entire gathering. We know that when we all come together to address a need or solve a problem the result nearly always exceeds expectations with "baskets full to spare"! Life is decidedly *not* a zero-sum game.

I was listening to an interview between Krista Tippett and Adele Diamond recently. Tippett is a journalist and author best known for her public radio show *On Being*. She did her undergraduate studies at Brown, was a Fulbright Scholar and received her Masters in Divinity from Yale. Tippet is fascinated by the intersection of science and religion and has interviewed many of the great astrophysicists of our time as well as the leading theologians of the world religions from the Dalai Lama to Desmond Tutu and the Archbishop of Canterbury. On this particular show, she was

interviewing a leading academic in the field of developmental cognitive neuroscience. That's a very fancy title for how we learn. The academic's work focused on early childhood learning and how the process seems to change as our brains grow to maturity in our late teens early 20s. One focus of conversation dealt with the importance of play and learning how to interact with peers in a variety of circumstances. How well children learn these skills has been shown to be a far more potent predictor of life success than IQ. That probably doesn't surprise those of you who work in education. And that led to a conversation about the importance of "doing". They talked specifically about community service requirements and mission trips for our school-aged children. Some of us –that would include me – lament the fact that membership in honor societies or college applications seem to be the primary motivator. But Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was quoted in his earlier work that it didn't really matter what the initial impetus for the activity was as long as the participant was fully engaged. What has been consistently observed is that by doing the good deed we become more inclined to do the next good deed and so on.

About six or eight years ago a writer for Esquire Magazine decided he would spend a year of his life trying to observe all 613 laws of Torah. It was not a serious theological endeavor but it did produce a best-selling book entitled *The Year of Living Biblically*. The New York Times likened it to a print version of reality TV but it led the writer, A.J. Jacobs, to confirm the notion that if we begin each day with a prayer of thanksgiving our outlook on life is likely to improve. As I have often heard at

coffee hour "life is what you make it". While on the book tour, Jacobs observed: "But I'd say most of us do underestimate the power that behavior has to shape thought" leading him to ask: what comes first; one's actions or one's beliefs?

Paul warns us to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. He lists the works of darkness as reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. That's quite a long list though I'm certain we could add to it was just a little bit of effort! What is it about the dark shadows that tempt us in ways we would never consider in bright daylight? What does a steady diet of this behavior of darkness do to what we believe; what we hold to be true and important? What are the consequences of underestimating the power that behavior has to shape our thought? And what comes first? Do dark thoughts lead us to the shadows or does the darkness have the power to shape our thoughts leading to licentiousness, quarreling as jealousy? Think about that as you consider the value of social safety nets, early childhood education and the fact that one-half of unemployed black youth are in prison.

Paul says "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) For anyone who has not given the subject much thought, exchanging 613 laws for a single, seemingly simple law sounds like it might be a pretty good deal. On the other hand, those who have given it just the slightest thought appreciate how challenging this commandment truly is. Who is my neighbor? How often must I forgive? How do I learn to say "I'm sorry" – not because I think I was wrong but

because I have hurt you in some way? Is it possible to love one another even if we don't like them?

What happens if rather than telling a child to follow a list of do's and don'ts we simply say to them: you know the difference between right and wrong; do the right thing. Most often it causes us to examine the *motivation* behind all that we do. We can no longer simply confront a situation and say as long as I don't do this one thing, I'm OK. To use a visual metaphor, life becomes much less black and white. It can be an overbearing burden to bear at times in our lives. If all we are asked to do is to obey this law or that law, we can find a way to say to ourselves "mission accomplished". But if we are asked to do the "right thing" can we ever be confident that we are acting out of love for neighbor as opposed to being motivated by our own self interests?

And then Paul makes this seemingly sudden right-hand turn and says: "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;" (Romans 13:11) This is often understood to be a warning that the end is near. But I do not believe Paul intends us to understand that judgment day is right around the corner. That may not seem like such a bold statement 2,000 years after the fact! And if we understand time to be linear and moving in a forward direction we can also understand that as a simple tautology – a simple statement of fact. But it is also consistent with the idea that salvation is a process and not a single moment of time. We are not suddenly saved for eternity because we make a declaration at a moment in time. And more to Paul's point there is an urgency to embrace this

notion of love right now; today. This is not a subject for procrastination; this is not a response to God's love that can be put off until tomorrow. This sense of urgency "was to encourage, not anxious calculation of the date of doomsday, but a moral seriousness which differentiated the Christian from other persons." (Interpreters Bible) For when we take up this commandment to love our neighbor, we are well on our way to knowing God's peace.

Even if we can get our brains around loving God and neighbor as our constant calling how do we actually do it? What does it look like? I like what JoAnn Haejong Lee wrote this week in *Christian Century* magazine. She says: "We are not asked to love without knowing what it means to be loved. We are not asked to forgive without knowing what it means to be forgiven. We are not asked to live in mystery without being fully known by the God of mystery."

As we prepare our hearts and minds to come to the Lord's table in humility and thanksgiving let us recall these words from the Gospel of John; words that point us to how; words that have changed the lives of millions:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." (John 3:16)

Amen