

We Are All In Debt

By: Meagan McLaughlin

September 6, 2020. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The sermon today is on God's call to fulfill the law by embodying God's love.

Readings: [Ezekiel 33:7-11](#), [Romans 13:8-14](#), [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

*** Transcript ***

Did you catch what Paul said in the letter to the Romans today? Like we were just saying, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” That's an amazing statement! Take all of the law encompassed in the Old Testament, and it can be fulfilled by simply loving one another. Rather than attending to what can seem to be an endless list of rules, we can trust that if we love our neighbor, we're doing God's will. For those of us who can get bogged down in details, this is really liberating. The only thing we need to do is love one another.

It's not always as simple as it seems, however. In the time of Jesus, faithful Jewish leaders debated long and hard about the statement “Love your neighbor,” particularly asking who their neighbor was. Jesus was part of these faithful discussions, and as we've seen time and time again, Jesus often presents us with a challenge to view things from a different perspective. During one such conversation, Jesus shared the parable of the Good Samaritan, which forced his listeners to see the Samaritan, a hated enemy of mainline Jewish people, as the neighbor who saved them from the ditch. Jesus calls us not only to love, but to love without distinction.

Even in small things, this is not easy. It can be hard to love the person who cuts us off in traffic, the person who gets too close to us without a mask in the grocery store, the neighbor who turns their music up at 10pm, the fellow church member with whom we've never gotten along, the frequent dog walker who doesn't clean up when their puppy visits our lawn.

The question of who we should consider to be our neighbor, who is worthy of love, is still debated today. And the truth is we are, often without realizing it, tempted to draw a line defining who is and who isn't our neighbor. Many in the United States wrestle with how to respond to our neighbors from the South who come to this country out of desperation. Police officers and community leaders here in St. Louis, and in Detroit, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle — so many cities around the country — are separated by thick walls of hate and fear. We struggle to get along with the family member whose political beliefs around these issues and others seem to go against our very core.

Divisions along racial lines are more volatile than ever as the realities of racism, and the evil of white supremacy, are visible in all their ugliness. Just this week, in Webster Groves, white supremacist tagging was left in several places around our neighboring churches, making it clear that even in Webster, hatred and oppression are present. These things happen, and it's heartbreaking and appalling. At the same time, those of us who don't live with this experience daily might find it hard to see as neighbor the person whose pain and anger at ongoing systemic oppression and violence is expressed in ways we don't understand.

Loving one another in fulfillment of the law doesn't sound so simple when we understand that Paul was talking about loving those we find it difficult to love. In Matthew, Jesus says that if a neighbor who has sinned against us will not listen even to the church, we are to consider them to be a tax collector or

a Gentile. This text has often been used to justify shunning or excommunicating someone who doesn't measure up. But if we're to understand what Jesus is really saying here, we need to remember that, far from separating himself from tax collectors and Gentiles, Jesus often found himself the center of attention for doing precisely the opposite. Jesus talked with them, listened to them, ate with them. Jesus loved them as they were, and called them, especially, to the fullness of life.

We're called to love not only when it's convenient for us, not only when our neighbor is someone we like and approve of, but to love everyone we meet, without condition. Even more unthinkable, perhaps, we're called to love those who have hurt us — those by whom we feel betrayed, or misunderstood, or abused. Sometimes we're called to love by doing the incredibly difficult work of maintaining boundaries and distance to prevent additional physical and emotional harm, for the safety and health of ourselves and our families.

And love is meant to be active. We're called to practice it, in our community of faith, our families, and our neighborhoods. In Ezekiel today, the prophet says God does not want anyone to be lost. We're called to embody God's relentless love, using the scriptures as our guide. We're called, as Moses was, to go toward the injustice, the pain, the woundedness, and proclaim God's redemptive justice and mercy. Love one another. What does that look like? Is it even possible?

The truth is, if our one primary directive, the fulfillment of all the law and the commands of God, is to love one another, to owe no one anything but love, we all fall short. None of us can love another to the fulfillment of the law. And yet, there it is. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." We owe our neighbors love. And we are all in debt.

We see evidence in the readings from Ezekiel and the Gospel of Matthew that God understands our plight, knows our indebtedness. In the verses immediately following this passage, Jesus tells his disciples that we are to forgive "seventy times seven times" when our neighbor asks forgiveness. When — not if — we fail to love, Ezekiel tells us we're to invite each other back to God, and remind ourselves of who we are called to be. We're all in debt. And the God of love knows this, and promises forgiveness, and life, no matter how far we fall.

And it is precisely where we fall that God steps in. When I have struggled most to love, because I feel overwhelmed by my own pain, anger, judgment, the wisdom of my mentors and companions on the road has led me straight to the cross, in two steps. One, often to my chagrin, is to remember and embrace my own humanity, my own capacity to make mistakes and harm others. If the person I struggle to love is imperfect, so am I. And Christ who travelled this human road to suffering and death understands the pain I bear — the pain that we bear — and our struggle to embody love. Two, is to pray for those I don't want to love. Not that they will see the light and come crawling to us on their knees, although that's tempting sometimes, but to pray that they have the very things we hope for ourselves. Healing. Justice. Mercy. Joy. Give them to the love of God, who can love them when I can't.

It is precisely where we fall that God steps in. For us as humans, on our own, loving to the fulfillment of the law is not possible. But with God miracles of love and healing are possible, and they happen every day. It is the love of God revealed in Jesus that redeems us from our debt. The love of God in Jesus enables us to love our neighbors, even when it's difficult. God's love in Jesus empowers us to speak words of promise and truth, to embody God's unbounded love and justice for all people.

Edmund Burke said, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." We are called to act, to claim, out loud and clear, that God's love extends to the very margins, and that racism, and

hatred, and oppression are evils that cannot stand in the light of that love. We humans do this so imperfectly, but still, the call persists. We are all in debt. But through the grace of God we are forgiven, and we are deeply loved and capable of loving. Where can God's love work in and through you to heal brokenness in your life, your family, and especially today, in your community?

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” God calls us to fulfill the law by embodying God’s love today, for we are redeemed by God’s love for each of us, today and every day.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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