

A LABOR OF LOVE

Warwick Central Baptist Church

September 6, 2020 Rev. Kathryn Palen, preaching

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 13:8-10

“Owe no one anything except to love one another.”

Paul makes it sound simple, doesn't he? He doesn't give us a long list of steps that we have to complete. He doesn't tell us to study a handbook in preparation for a written exam. He doesn't outline a set of achievements that we must accomplish.

Instead, Paul simply writes, “Owe no one anything except to love one another.” That's it—plain and simple. Love one another.

As much as I'd like to believe that loving others is simple or easy, I can't help but agree with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote: “For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparatory.”

On this Labor Day weekend, it seems fitting for us to think about that task, that work, that labor that we call love.

Maybe a good starting place is to consider what Paul means by *love*.

What's the first that comes to your mind when you hear the word *love*? Do you think of romance? The way you felt about your first real love or a love long lost. The way you feel about your spouse or partner or that person you've noticed and you hope will notice you. Or when you hear the word *love*, do you think about a warm and safe feeling that you get deep inside? The kind that you experience when you're with really good friends or special family members. The kind of feeling that nothing less than a Hallmark card can adequately express.

When Paul talks about love—specifically Christian love—he doesn't seem to be pointing to an emotion—no matter how healthy or wonderful that emotion may be. Think about it. If Paul were talking about an emotion, how could he claim love as the ultimate rule for the Christian life? How could he say that we're always supposed to love others?

Let's face it. There are some folks who just aren't likeable, much less lovable. And there are times when we feel anything but loving—towards those folks or towards anyone else. What then? Are we supposed to be able to generate cozy emotions upon demand?

I don't think that's what Paul's trying to say. In Paul's writings, as well as throughout the rest of the New Testament, love centers on actions, rather than emotions.

Love isn't about how we feel; it's about what we do. In fact, the bottom line is that regardless of how we feel, we're to act in loving ways. And that's where the hard work, the ultimate task of which Rilke wrote, comes into play.

According to this morning's reading from Romans, at the very least, love is *not* doing wrong to someone else. Paul views the commandments that God gave to Israel as setting the limits of faithful behavior for God's people. He sees love as summing up all of the "thou-shall-not" commandments about how we're to relate to others. Love is what we refuse to do—to murder, to steal, to covet—for the sake of others. In fact, Paul says that love fulfills the law.

David Bartlett, who was my adviser in divinity school, thought it was a good idea to remember that Paul believed love fulfills the law rather than annuls it—especially in today's "feel-good" culture.

David explained that "faithful obedience reminds us that love doesn't mean doing whatever feels good to me. It means—at the very least—living up to the law, which will not do the neighbor harm. Love may be more than that, but it's never less than that."

If we're really serious about the work of love, I think we'll want to go beyond the bare minimum. Now we probably need to acknowledge that sometimes not doing any harm is the most of which we are or will be capable. Perhaps past experiences will paralyze us. Maybe we'll encounter a person who rejects our best efforts to help. Perhaps a situation will seem so overwhelming that we're simply at a loss for what to do. In those moments, we can hold onto Paul's conclusion that we've loved others by the fact that we haven't done any to harm them.

Despite such moments, there seems to be something within us, something in the depths of our being that whispers to us that we've been created to love. This deep and persistent calling transforms the work of love into a true vocation.

In his book *To Love and Be Loved*, Sam Keen says that "fulfilling this imperative, responding to this vocation, is the central meaning of our life." And loving others is a life-long endeavor. When Paul says that the only thing we should owe is to love one another, he never indicates that we'll ever finish paying what we owe.

Well, how do we respond to this vocation—this calling to love? If we take Paul one step beyond not harming others, I think it's safe to say that we can love others by working for their good or well-being. Sometimes that work will seem light and joyful.

Sam Keen describes such moments as the times "we feel so blessed by the very existence of our child, our friend, our lover, our mate, that our hearts overflow with spontaneous gratitude. The gift they bestow on us by their presence, the vicarious joy we experience in sharing their lives, elicits a great sigh of thanksgiving and with it a desire to please, help, and delight them in any way we can. We feel the union of I and thou; we love our neighbor as our self. And we give for the pure joy of it."

At other times, working for the good of others will be hard and uncomfortable. It may even demand that we sacrifice our own well-being.

Think what it would mean to identify with other humans beings—to feel their pain, their confusion, their loneliness, their tragedy, their loss, their hopelessness. And then, out of those feelings, to act.

It may be that family member who drives us crazy. What can we do to love that person? Maybe it's a supervisor or a teacher with whom we just can't seem to connect. How can we act for that person's good? It may be the street protestor advocating for justice or the person left homeless by Hurricane Laura. How do we show our love for that person? Maybe it's someone in this congregation with whom we've disagreed in the past. Can we find ways to work for that person's well-being?

There's something else about this labor of love. In addition to how it fulfills the law or how it may mean working for other people's well-being, loving others can change us.

Acting for the good of someone else isn't contingent on how we feel about that person. And perhaps there are people for whose good we'll work, but for whom we'll never feel any differently.

But I also believe that there are times when our actions may transform our emotions. We may come to feel differently toward someone because we've loved that person through our actions. We may gain a new insight, understanding, or perspective about that person. And, in doing so, we may discover a new appreciation or affection for him or her. The change will take place, not in that person, but in us.

Several years ago while I was visiting friends in Fort Worth, I read about an unusual ministry there. It was called the Church on the Slab.

This ministry, which offered meals and a spiritual outlet to homeless people, operated on a concrete foundation just off Interstate 35. Each week, nearly forty children gathered in a small building next to the slab for Sunday school. Most of these children lived with their grandparents because their mothers were dead, in jail, or living on the streets. Many of the children had never met their fathers.

The newspaper article told the story of one of the volunteers who worked with the children. One Sunday morning, Vesta Wilson gave a bag of miniature race cars to a six-year-old boy. As she did, she hugged the boy and said, "Larry, I love you." The boy began to cry and said, "Nobody ever told me they loved me."

That experience changed Vesta Wilson. It opened her heart to the children with whom she worked. Three years later, she was still driving from Arlington to Fort Worth each Sunday, and she truly loved those children.

Loving others also can change our frame of reference.

At times, loving others may seem like work. (And, at times, it is!) At other time, it may seem like a vocation, a calling in the truest sense. (And it can be that, as well.) But there are those moments when loving others suddenly may appear to be pure gift.

There's a wonderful scene near the end of the movie *Marvin's Room*. The film, which was adapted from a play by the same name, tells the story of two sisters.

Bessie has sacrificed her own life to care for her aging father and aunt. Leigh has had little to do with the family until a recent return to her childhood home.

As the sisters talk about their very different lives, Bessie says: "I've been so lucky. I've been so lucky to have Dad and Ruth. I've had such love in my life. I look back, and I've had so much love."

Sure that she understands what her sister means, Leigh somewhat grudgingly

agrees, “They love you very much.”

But Bessie quickly responds, “No, that’s not what I mean. I mean that I love them. I’ve been so lucky to have been able to love someone so much.”

“Owe no one anything except to love one another.”

On this Labor Day weekend—as well as throughout our entire lives—what better work could we hope to find? Amen.

Invitation to Communion

I’m grateful that loving others may change us. But I think it also may bring about another change.

In one of his sermons, Martin Luther King, Jr., said: “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that we will be able to make of this old world a new world. We will be able to make men [and women] better. Love is the only way.”

Love that offers the possibility and power to change the world.

When we celebrate communion, in many ways we celebrate that redemptive power of love. The bread and cup Jesus offered his first followers and offers us today are reminders that his redemptive love would survive attempts to destroy it and go on to change the world.

This morning as we share the gifts that Jesus offers, may we commit ourselves to becoming vehicles of God’s love—a love that refuses to respond to violence with more violence; a love that refuses to return rejection when rejected; a love that refuses to believe that anyone or anything is beyond being redeemed or that the world—no matter how broken—is beyond being changed.