

“The Love We Owe”

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Scripture: Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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Sometimes the folks who determine the lectionary readings do us a disservice by lifting a passage out of the middle of a broader context. Some might say that's always the case, but very often the readings are able to stand on their own. But not this Sunday. These instructions from Jesus about how to handle differences in the community really need to be heard as part of a bigger picture.

Too often, I suppose, that's our biggest challenge. We have a tendency to limit our focus to the particular, to the narrow view. We want things to be concise and linear, to move easily and logically from one point to the next. And these instructions do exactly that. If you have a conflict with another in the community: first, go to them directly and state your complaint; and if that doesn't win them back, next go to them with two others from the community; and if that still doesn't work, finally, go before the whole community. And if all three attempts fail, then you can regard that person as “a Gentile and a tax collector.”

It's a very clear-cut progression. It makes a lot of sense. At least, it does until we realize that this clear, logical instruction follows a story about a shepherd going after a lost sheep. In that story Jesus offers a radical, ridiculous image of someone willing to risk the well-being of ninety-nine for the sake of one that is lost. The bigger picture is coming into focus. And just after these instructions we have the exchange between Jesus and Peter that leads to an image of limitless forgiveness: forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven.

Wait a minute! Three strikes and you're out, right? So now it's just confusing. When do we get to kick these people out? When do we get to treat them like “Gentiles and tax collectors?” And how is it we treat those people, again...? Oh yeah, Jesus ate dinner with them and healed them. So now we can see his instructions not just in the context of the chapter, but in the context of the whole gospel, the whole warp and woof of Jesus' life.

Jesus doesn't reject Gentiles and tax collectors. He doesn't consign them to some special category of evil. He goes after them like that bizarre shepherd in his story. He offers them a limitless spring of forgiveness. He loves them in spite of the world's rejection of them. So if our conflict with another has brought us to the point that we can now regard them “as a Gentile and a tax collector,” then we may want to keep in mind what such people meant to Jesus.

So, does all this mean we should really ignore disagreements and conflicts? Well, that would be easy to do. In fact some families and churches are expert at it. Some of us go for years and years never complaining, never acknowledging wrongs done to us. We're able to drift along quietly carrying our disappointment and outrage deep within us. We think we're loving one another by doing that, but it's an acidic sort of love that mostly gives us ulcers.

I don't think that's what Paul means when he tells the Christians in Rome to “owe no one anything, except to love one another.” He's not telling them to ignore each other's sins. The love we owe one another isn't an excuse for blissful ignorance. The love we owe is the love

we've been shown in Christ. It's a love rooted in a deep understanding of our common condition. There's an ancient story of a Christian hermit named Abbot Moses. He was summoned from his solitude once by the elders of his order to join them in passing judgment on another brother who had sinned. He didn't want to go, but was finally persuaded. But when he left he took with him an old basket full of holes which he filled with sand and carried behind him. Well, the elders came out to meet him and asked, "Father, what is this you've brought with you?" He replied, "My sins are running out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I come to judge the sins of another!" With that, the elders said nothing to the brother who had sinned but pardoned him.

We can never forget who we are and the love we owe one another. So when we confront one another we are called to do that from a position of great humility and not arrogance or self-righteousness. In his book, *The Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King, jr., explains the need to hold tough-mindedness in tension with tender-heartedness as African Americans confronted the sin of racism. His call for nonviolent resistance allowed him and his followers to avoid giving in both to the sin of injustice and to the sin of hatred.

King and his followers, like Abbot Moses, did what Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to do: they put on Christ. They opened themselves to the love of Christ that is able to confront the reality of sin without being swept up in its influence. The danger we face isn't the presence of this person's or that person's sinful behavior. The real danger is using that behavior as an excuse to reject them and refuse to extend them the love of Christ.

We live in a very divisive society right now, as you know if you've been watching the political conventions and listening to the commentary. That divisiveness makes its way into the life of the Church and is often perpetuated and amplified, deepened, by the Church. In the midst of that we often forget the debt of love we owe one another. Instead we fall into a winner-take-all mentality that pigeon-holes certain ones into that "Gentile and tax collector" category without a thought for Jesus' regard for them. You may be familiar with this document, the report from the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. It provides a framework for helping us confront one another without rejecting one another. The Task Force observes at one point: "In a world of divisiveness and violence, it is essential for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord to show the reason for the hope that is within us by dealing differently with one another, for in Jesus Christ, the church has been called to a transformed way of living."

That "transformed way" is the love we owe one another. The new identity we find when we put on Christ shapes every relationship we have....even those with folks who wrong us or whose behavior we despise. We owe them our love. It's not a debt we can ever fully pay; we'll never love one another as fully as God loves us in Christ. But little by little we make our installments as day by day we are shaped, molded, more and more in the image of Christ.

Amen