

## Love for One Another

### Romans 13:8-14

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup> Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Last weekend we celebrated Labor Day in the United States, here in Michigan the beginning of a new season in the life of most congregations. Bridging the long summer, when many of us would have been away on vacation, and the beginning of the school year for students and teachers of all ages, if we were not in the midst of a pandemic that has disrupted the patterns of our lives. This Sunday Paul exhorts us "to wake from sleep!"

While Paul's teachings refer to something considerably deeper than beginning a new program year, it does seem a good time to remind ourselves of the urgency of our mission as Christians. This urgency in Paul relates not only to his perception that Christ's return may be imminent, but also to his understanding of the immensity of the task before the young churches: nothing less than working with God toward the transformation of the world. These two millennia later, that task still sits at the center of the mission of the church, and it is no less urgent for the passage of time or the many failures and missed opportunities to live into God's realm along the way.

Instead of setting out an organizational chart for transformation with grand plans, however, Paul sees that our part of this mission will be fulfilled only if

Christians begin with how we interact with neighbors, both neighbors in the church and those outside it. Paul returns in particular to the centrality of love. This word “love” presents us with a constant challenge, since in English we use the word "love" to refer almost exclusively to emotion, and we tie it to how we feel about things as unrelated as ice cream and our children.

Paul, however, makes clear that love has very little to do with emotion. The examples of love to which he refers have to do with behavior rather than feelings. Love fulfills the commandments not to break marriage vows and not to murder, steal, or covet. With the possible exception of covetousness, these commandments concern action, not emotion. Our neighbors will know that we love them by how we treat them, not by greeting card sayings.

As though laying out his own take on the Hippocratic oath, Paul tells us that love does no harm to a neighbor. Jesus has already nicely defined "neighbor" to include any human being with whom we interact. We fulfill the law by acting in a loving way toward our families, our enemies, our friends, the clerk in the convenience store, our boss at work, even the people who live next door who play their loud music until all hours of the night. Just in case we miss the point, Paul repeats himself, assuring us again that we fulfill God's law by loving.

This love is not a secret to be kept among the small circle of believers in a congregation, or in our hearts. There is to be no mystery about how we act in God's name. In fact, it is only through Christians living our love in action that disciples will be prepared for the time that Christ returns, or that the world will know of Christ and thus be ready for the transformative realm to come. Christians are not called to be subtle and secret, but to live so that everyone can see clearly who we are.

Peter Gomes, the longtime chaplain at Harvard University, tells a story from his childhood about a secretive after-school trip to a movie theater with plans to see a

rather racy movie. When he got to the theater, he realized that the ticket seller happened to be a friend of his family. She asked young Peter if his mother knew where he was. Realizing that he needed to be up front with his mother about his desire to see this movie, instead of sneaking behind her back, he did not buy the ticket.

Living in the light means accountability. Paul calls it living "honorably." Peter Gomes might describe it as living so that if his mother knew what he was doing, she would not be disappointed. Those things that might disappoint God include, for Paul, such obvious matters as drunkenness and sexual immorality, but also failings common to nearly everyone: quarreling and jealousy. Paul is repeating a theme he expressed earlier when he exhorted Christians to live peaceably with everyone (12:18).

In the midst of the moral issues that seem to bedevil many Christians, individually and as congregations, Paul's challenge to us to see quarreling on par with abuse of alcohol and sex. This brings many of us up short. When how we act toward one another is seen not only by God but by those outside the church, our goal of building up the body of Christ on earth is damaged. As the South African freedom song "Siyahamba" puts it,

Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos',  
 Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos',  
 Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos',  
 Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwen-,  
 Khanyen' kwenkhos',  
 Siyahamba, hamba,  
 Siyahamba, hamba,  
 Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwen-,  
 Khanyen' kwenkhos'.  
 Siyahamba, hamba,

Siyahamba, hamba,  
Siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'.

We are marching in the light of God,  
We are marching in the light of God,  
We are marching in the light of God,  
We are marching in the light of,  
The light of God,  
We are marching, marching,  
We are marching, marching,  
We are marching in the light of,  
The light of God,  
We are marching, marching,  
We are marching, marching,  
We are marching in the light of God

"We are marching in the light of God," and how we march makes all the difference to the end of the journey. **Rochelle A. Stackhouse**

If there is anything that followers of Jesus owe to any person, it must be nothing other than love, to paraphrase the apostle Paul (v. 8). Love (*agapē*), serves as the identity marker of the Christian community. As an identity marker, love defines the attitude, behavior, and norm by which the Christian community takes account of its life. This love, as the Christian mystics put it, has two feet: love of God and love of neighbor. It is not that one must love God first in order to love the neighbor, but that the love of God is simultaneously inseparable from the love of neighbor, because God has become the neighbor. **Eleazar S. Fernandez**

So, we return again to the theme of the urgency of our mission as Christians. Paul saw the mission as urgent in light of Christ's expected imminent return. We live in the years of "now but not yet" that have followed. In one way, the call to live in love, with our actions revealing that love, remains as urgent as ever, both

because we continue to anticipate Christ's return and because we live in a world so full of darkness and brokenness.

Unlike Paul, however, we have a greater sense of the truth that the Christian life is lived out day to day, with each day presenting challenges and each day building on the one before, as we journey toward being the people God has gifted us to be. Simply, love is the essence of discipleship, the basis for transformation. That love, however, involves all we are and do, individually and as faith communities, every day. **Rochelle A. Stackhouse**

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