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“The Law of Love” **Sermon on Romans 13:8-14**

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Romans 13:8–14

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off^[a] the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

There are certain seasons of life when you spend an inordinate amount of time fretting over one particular issue. When you can think of little else but that one looming problem or decision. For some it's a difficult relationship or a situation at work. For others it's a decision you just can't seem to make.

For me, lately, it has been real estate.

Many of you know that my husband, Michael, and I have been heroically navigating the Nashville housing market as we plan to relocate from Spring Hill to somewhere a little closer to the church. Which means that these days I spend a surprising amount of time thinking about houses. Interest rates. Mortgages. Down payments. Closing costs. Refinancing.

And so, when I came to this passage from Romans this week and read Paul's opening words—“Owe no one anything...” —I thought, well, Paul, that's going to be a problem in this economic climate. Because if this is a commandment to be completely debt-free, we are in trouble.

But of course, that is not what Paul is getting at. And he immediately tells us that there is one debt we should never expect to pay off. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” One thing we will never be able to check off the list – I did it! I loved everyone! Love is the debt we can never pay off.

Because love is not just another item on a long list of things Christians are supposed to do. Love is the whole list.

“The commandments,” —don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't covet — all of them are summed up in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It's that simple. It's that complicated.

But here's the Good News – the Christian life does not begin with **our** ability to conjure up feelings of love. It begins with **God's love for us**. That distinction matters. Because if all of this is simply a command to love, then it becomes just one more thing we aren't doing well enough. One more standard by which to measure ourselves. But Paul is not saying, “Try harder to be loving.”

He is reminding us of how loved we are. How the living God has lavished grace and mercy upon us that if we can receive it – truly receive it and allow it to transform us– then our lives will be inherently different. He is saying that because of what God has already done in Christ, we have nothing more to do but respond with gratitude.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We tend to rush past those last two words. “As yourself.” But we shouldn't. There are some of us who find it very easy to love everyone except themselves. Some of us who are remarkably gracious to other people and surprisingly cruel to ourselves. We would never speak to a friend the way we speak to ourselves. We would never tell our neighbor that she is a failure, that she is unworthy, that she should have known better, that she isn't enough.

And yet we say these things to ourselves all the time.

So perhaps part of learning to love our neighbor begins with learning to receive God's love for ourselves. Not the inflated self-love of our culture. Not believing that we are perfect or making ourselves the center of the universe. But the quiet, astonishing recognition that you belong to God.

And so does the person sitting next to you in the pew. And so does the person with whom you disagree. And so does the person you have written off. And so does the person who has hurt you.

This week author and poet, Wendell Berry, passed away. If you have not heard that name before, I encourage you to run home and look up his poem “*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*”. I was first introduced to Berry's writing in college as we were assigned to read one of his novels, *Jayber Crow* (which I also commend to you). One of my favorite lines in the book is from the title character who has this to say about love:

“We do not make it. If it did not happen to us, we could not imagine it. It includes the world and time as a pregnant woman includes her child whose wrongs she will suffer and forgive. It is in the world but is not altogether of it. It is of eternity. It takes us there when it most holds us here.”

I think what he's saying is that we cannot manufacture love; we can only receive it. And when we do, we discover that it transforms us. It holds us. It includes us. It takes us somewhere we could not have gotten by ourselves. And perhaps that is why the debt of love can never be settled.

Because the more love we receive, the more we realize there is to give. The more grace we know, the more grace we have to offer. The more deeply we understand that we belong to God, the less interested we become in trying to figure out who is "in" and who is "out."

Love your neighbor as yourself. This is only possible with Jesus. That is why Paul encourages us to "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Put on Christ. What would it mean to put on Christ?

Perhaps on his compassion. His patience. His willingness to cross boundaries. His refusal to give up on people. His capacity to forgive. Paul isn't simply saying, "Go out there and be nicer." He is saying: **Put on Christ.** Let his life become your life. Let his way of seeing become your way of seeing... your way of being. Starting now because "you know what time it is". Paul says wake up.

Because something is happening. The day is coming. The dawn is near.

As many of you know I have four-year-old Grace; but you do not know that she has this adorably inconvenient habit of getting out of bed and coming in to ask me if it is time to wake up. I crack one eye open to see if the light is coming through the blinds. Is it dark? Is it dim? Is it sunshine? That will determine whether I guide her back to her bed to sleep, invite her under the covers to cuddle, or bolt up in bed panicked that I didn't hear my alarm.

The night is far gone. The dawn is near. This is the first light of day. It's the light you see that hits the trees and the edge of the horizon before the sun comes into view at all.

That's why Paul is calling us to wake up.

Wake up because the world is not finally defined by darkness. Wake up because Christ is coming. Wake up because God's future is already piercing the present. Wake up because salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Wake up because there are already signs of the dawn.

And maybe the church is meant to be one of those signs. Not because we are perfect. Not because we have finally mastered all the rules or have all the right answers. But because we have learned to love. Every time we forgive someone, a little light comes into the world. Every time we welcome someone who expects to be rejected, a little light comes into the world. Every time we refuse to dehumanize someone with whom we disagree, a little light comes into the world. Every time we feed someone who is hungry, visit someone who is lonely, sit beside someone who is grieving, or make room for someone who has been pushed to the margins—a little light comes into the world.

The dawn is coming. And we are called to live as though we can already see it.

Now here I want to take a moment and pause to acknowledge Ashley's reading of our first scripture lesson from Exodus 12. (Good job, Ashley!) That was a doozy... and a seemingly out-of-place doozy if you don't mind me saying so. What does that dense and difficult passage

about lamb's blood and the death of the first born have to do with what we find in Romans today? How does it all fit together? There is of course a method to the lectionary creators' madness as they pair texts together each week.

The thrust of Exodus 12 and Exodus as a book is the movement from slavery to freedom. From the misery the Israelites knew to the mystery they did not. From dark to light. From night to dawn.

Paul is inviting the Church into freedom as well. He is urging us to wake up because we are no longer slaves to sin or bound by darkness. We are people of light. Paul is telling us to act like it. And the best way to do that is through love. Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self.

If you look at the cover of your bulletin, I chose a piece of art from artist Scott Erickson (another name you should run home to look up if you haven't heard of him). Fear trusts scarcity. Love trusts abundance.

In a society that seeks to cultivate fear and then swoop in as false savior to rescue us from imagined scarcity. We who have plenty can begin to believe there is not enough to go around, that we must clench our fists around what we have. But our real savior, Jesus Christ, gives us a different narrative and invites us to loosen our grip on that which we think we must have – comfort, security, pleasure, so we might embrace the love he just can't wait to lavish upon us.

Think about the abundance of God's love throughout Scripture. Jesus feeds five thousand people. Not because they have earned dinner. Not because they have passed a theological examination. They are simply hungry. And somehow, there is enough.

Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who goes looking for one lost sheep. Not because ninety-nine percent is a bad return. But because love does not abandon anyone. The younger son takes his inheritance, leaves home, squanders it, and the father does not stand on the porch with a clipboard keeping tabs of the debt incurred. He runs. He embraces. He welcomes.

God's love seems reckless to us. It keeps spilling over. And if we can begin to comprehend—even just a little—how deeply we are loved by God, then love begins to flow outward from us not as an obligation but as a response.

We love because we have first been loved. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We make room because room has been made for us. We become generous because we have discovered that grace is not a scarce commodity. God has given it in abundance. Christ came that we might have life abundant and that means a life of love.

There is always enough. **Love isn't a limited resource.**

So what time is it?

It is time to wake up. It is time to taste and see that the Lord is indeed good, it's time to share the goodness of love with our neighbors through Jesus Christ our Lord Amen.