

Faith Mennonite Church
September 7, 2008

A Conversation about Love
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

J: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another...” Excuse me, God, but I just preached a sermon on love 2 weeks ago.

G: *But it was summer and lots of folks were away.*

J: But what about the folks that *were* here. Do they get penalized for coming to church by having to listen to two sermons on love in two weeks?

G: *Since when is love a negative thing? I’ve been trying to communicate about love for thousands of years. What makes you so presumptuous to think that you’ve exhausted the topic in a single Sunday? Or to think that everyone will remember everything you said after two weeks. Humans only remember about 20% of what they hear. So if you really want to get a point across, you should probably preach the same sermon about five Sundays in a row.*

J: With all due respect, I think I’ll vet that idea with the church council before I try it out. But seriously, it’s a hard thing to talk about love these days, especially your kind of love, covenant love that isn’t just about romantic or familial feelings...the kind of love that people think just happens naturally. Your love requires a commitment, calls us to love enemies, asks us to think seriously about how our actions might be affecting other people, and worst of all, actually asks us to confront someone if we feel they’ve violated a trust of love.

You see—well of course you see; I can’t tell *you* anything you don’t already know. But let me vent. We live in a very individualistic society and culture here in the United States. There’s a very strong attitude that what I do as an individual isn’t anyone else’s business, and thus the reverse is also true: what others do isn’t my business either. When people become members of this church they agree to give and to receive counsel, but practically that’s a pretty hard thing to live out.

G: *You’re right, I know your culture and what the church is up against. But that’s all the more reason for talking about how love works within the context of the church. And trust me on this one, the folks that are sitting in the pews in front of you this morning, they’re here because they want to be, they’re seeking me. They’ve chosen this church because it’s a place where people do care about actions and living out their faith, where people are willing to talk about costly discipleship. It’s okay to talk some more about love.*

J: Okay... Paul’s words about owing no one anything except the debt of love were written as a follow-up to the previous section where he addressed the Christian relationship to governing authorities. Early Christians, like us, lived in an Empire and grappled with what it meant to pay taxes, offer allegiance, and respect the rulers. Paul reminds them that if they truly love one another they’ll automatically be keeping the most important law, from Leviticus, love your neighbor as yourself. The Law that Paul cites, the Commandments that deal with interpersonal relationships, were aimed at *restraining harm* against another—don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t cheat on your spouse, and don’t be envious of the things someone else has that you don’t have. Love, Paul says, is a positive thing that goes beyond the prohibition. “It invites one to place *oneself* precisely in the position of the neighbor and allow one’s action to flow from the question, ‘What would I desire in this situation?’ rather than, ‘What ought I do or refrain from doing with

regard to this person?”¹ This is essentially what God did in the incarnation. In Jesus, God was able to be our neighbor, to love us humans as God loves Godself.

Paul goes on to say that if we are living in this commonwealth of love, it affects all of our actions. And we need to be aware what time it is: we’re living in a particular time, a time when the new day, initiated by Jesus through his life, death, and resurrection, overlaps with a world still caught in the grip of sin. Just as love puts us in the shoes of our neighbor to consider what is best for them, this love puts us in a position of daily considering the wholeness that God wants for us individually. Paul uses interesting language when he encourages us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Christians of his time would have connected this with their baptism. Early Christians often stripped off their old clothes and walked into the baptismal waters naked, signifying that they were leaving one life behind. As they came out of the waters they put on a white robe, symbolizing their new life in Christ. When we “put on Jesus” in baptism, we are taking on a new persona, desiring at all times to honor God in the way we eat, drink, and relate intimately with others, as well as in our ethical relationships in community.

In Matthew 18, we find the pattern by which one Christian community tried to put this all into practice, recognizing that as humans we’re all bound to stumble and in some cases drift off course. If we truly love, we will talk directly with a brother and sister, not in judgment but in true concern: What is happening? I didn’t understand our interaction. Can you tell me more? This direct approach allows an individual protection against gossip and hearsay.

In the community of Matthew’s gospel, if a person was unwilling to listen to the counsel of a friend, the next step was for several people to go, again in love not judgment. But if the person continued to resist this counsel, it became a matter for the entire church. At this point, if the person, “the offender,” still does not listen, there *is* a judgment: they are treated as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now the questions rises: how do we treat Gentiles and tax collectors? How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He welcomed them in love, yes, and he also invited them to conversion, which carried an implicit judgment. The stories we have in the gospels are of those who answered this call, who joined the Jesus way, and changed the way they had been living. We can imagine that others thought the stakes of following were too high and returned to their collecting.

Our walk as a Christian community is a walk of continual conversion. Each day, just as we choose the clothes we will put on, we also choose whether we will put on Jesus, who calls us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As we make that daily commitment to follow and to love, we find ourselves becoming more conscious of God’s presence throughout the day, and we find a growing love and concern for those around us, even the ones who grate us the most, the ones who have caused us the most pain.

Jesus came to us—and comes to us in the bread and cup—not because we’re always loveable but because his nature is love. As we open ourselves more fully to this love it will draw us more deeply to each other, opening us to hear the concerns of a brother or sister, and giving us the courage to call one another to live honorably in this time, God’s time.

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¹ Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Sacra Pagina: Romans*. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., ed. Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1996 (395)