

Love Does No Wrong to a Neighbor

Romans 13:8-10

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I took a little walk around my house and garage, and I found a few things that I owe to people. Tom Garten, this is your shovel. I borrowed it at the trustee work day a year ago. Jane Strong, this is your rake. It ended up in my truck on the following trustee work day. Judy Benton, here is your copy of Atonement. I finished reading it last week. Bill Mitlehner, here is a replacement inner tube for the one you lent me when I got a flat tire on Thompson Road this summer. If I keep looking, I know I'll find other stuff I owe people. But even if I were to do that and return every borrowed pie pan, every borrowed novel, every borrowed golf tee; I would still be indebted to you all. I would still owe my neighbors a measure of love. This is the one debt that can never be paid in full. And this takes us to the heart of the theology of the Apostle Paul.

In his lifetime, Paul tasted every kind of sweet thing in existence. He traveled to Corinth where he ate baklava. He sailed to Rome where he nibbled Italian cookies like the ones we buy on Franklin Avenue. He stopped in Cypress where they invented milk chocolate from cocoa beans. He sipped lemonade at a café in Athens. He sampled the Turkish taffy in Ephesus. He even ate fudge ripple ice cream when he reached Thessalonica. But of all the sweet things in the universe, nothing tasted as sweet to him as the love of Christ as he experienced it one day along the road to Damascus. It was even sweeter than the honey we purchase at Gram's farm stand on Main Street just beyond Kimberly Lane.

When Paul least expected to be loved, least deserved to be loved, least imagined being loved, Christ encountered him, knocked him off his horse, got his attention, and then loved him into a new way of being. A new way of being!

Paul had been on his way to cause trouble among his neighbors when Christ loved him into a whole different attitude. He was on his way to arrest some of his innocent neighbors when Christ loved him into seeing those people in a new way. He was on his way to terrorize a neighboring village when Christ loved him into a whole new frame of mind. And from that day, call it his day of awareness, his day of consciousness, his day of new birth, his day of being undeniably loved...from that day Paul felt forever indebted to return that love to the world. For him, it was a debt that could never be fully repaid.

Unlike other debts that we pay off over time, the love debt is never paid in full. A home owner's mortgage may be paid in 20 or 30 years, but the debt to love our neighbors has no such expiration date. Certain crimes have a statute of limitation, a number of years after which the perpetrator is no longer accountable for his or her behavior. With our accountability for loving the folks down the road, there is no statute of limitation. Once we have become aware of the force of Christ's redeeming love in our own lives, the call to love the neighbor forever rings in a believer's ear.

Unlike the mortgage debt to the bank or the interest debt to the credit card company, debts that always feel like a heavy burden, the love debt is no burden at all. In 1941, Father Edward Flanagan, browsing through an issue of 'The Messenger', saw a drawing of a boy carrying a younger boy on his back, with the caption, "He ain't heavy Mr., he's my brother." Father Flanagan gained permission to use that as the slogan for Boys Town, a community that has now become Girls and Boys Town.

These words or slightly altered versions of these words have found their way into tons of movies and hit songs. But they really do capture the essence of love's sweet paradox. She's not heavy, she's my sister. He ain't heavy Mr., he's my brother. The Apostle Paul would have loved that Spencer Tracey movie and would have appreciated the Hollies' musical recording, and would have been moved to hear what Elton John does with it on the piano.

Having been loved into a new being, Paul feels a love debt to anyone and everyone. And for him, this debt is not a burden but a privilege, not a stumbling block but a corner stone, not a heavy load but a sweet dessert. He writes to the Romans, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

One of the memorable funerals we've witnessed here in our church was the service honoring Ken Truesdell. Among other things, what I recall is the presence of the Silk City Chorus. They sat as a group right over there. And when the time came, they stood and they sang an old Congregational hymn, "How Can I Keep from Singing?" It was the perfect hymn for that occasion because Ken was one of those people who couldn't not sing. Song flowed out of him like sap flows from a sugar maple in springtime. It was as if music had touched his soul and had set him free to be the person God had made him to be, and somehow he felt indebted to return the favor, to sing such that someone else might find themselves turned on to the life-changing power of music. He felt compelled to sing, but the compulsion was never a burden, always a delight.

The Silk City Chorus sang:

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul – how can I keep from singing?

This week, we looked at the TV screen and we listened to the radio and we saw and heard from our neighbors in Louisiana and Mississippi and Alabama. We saw them become homeless overnight. How can we keep from singing? How can we do anything but love them? We saw them run out of food and run out of water and run out of time. How can we keep from singing? How can we keep from loving them? We saw them desperate and destitute and dying. How can we keep from singing? How can we keep from loving them? We saw them in buses, in boats, in helicopters, and in domed stadiums. How can we keep from singing? How can we keep from loving them? Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

Over the past several days, many of you have called the church looking for ways to reach out in love to our neighbors on the Gulf Coast. You have called with compassionate suggestions. Let's adopt a family from Biloxi. Let's take food over to the armory. Let's send school kits to a school in Louisiana. Let's send clothing. Let's send money. Let's send construction teams, clean-up crews, medical supplies. Let's send plumbers and nurses and engineers. Clearly, we are poised for love.

We may or may not have ever lost a home in a flood or in a fire. We may or may not have ever lost all our possessions. We may or may not have ever gone three days without food or water. We may or may not have ever gone a week without a shower or a day without a phone or an hour without a hope. But at some point in our lives we have all been loved, loved when we weren't expecting to be loved, loved when we least deserved it, loved by God into being a new person. On one level, I suppose it could be said that we don't owe any of those people anything. We could blame them for having built their houses where they did and let it go at that. But on a deeper level, a spiritual level, we never stop owing them; for having been loved by God, we have this uncanceled debt that binds us to all God's children everywhere.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” This is the essence of our Christian faith as expressed so eloquently by the Apostle Paul. And, as always, I share it now with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.