

Since the end of June, we have been reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. For my own part, this commitment to stay with Romans over the course of these summer weeks has been a helpful exercise for my own personal growth, and I hope it has been that for all of you as well.

Paul explores some huge theological issues in Romans. Back in June, I mentioned that in my role as a preacher, I usually find it a real challenge to know precisely where to start and where to stop with Paul each week, especially when you have roughly fifteen minutes to explore a text. It's a challenge to speak about his imperial political context, the social context of a congregation comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, his theological perspective on grace, and the particular issues a particular congregation may be facing—and then connect all of that to our lives in a quarter of an hour. Often for me what that means practically, as a preacher, is that I just avoid Paul—not because I don't think he's important to our life of faith, but for exactly the opposite reason: because I think he's too important to treat superficially. In general, it's easier for me to preach a more self-contained reading from the Old Testament or a parable in the Gospels than it is to jump in at the deep end of the pool with Paul. So, for me, the advantage of this summer series is that it has allowed me to spread that out a bit as a preacher—to linger at certain points and know I could come back to that the following week. I've been grateful to have the extended time to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Paul's *Letter to the Romans* and to try to hear the good news it speaks across the centuries to the Church in our day.

The practical challenge, however, in a parish that comes and goes in a lot of different directions between Memorial Day and Labor Day is in trying to sustain that momentum as people head to the mountains and the beach, to camp grounds and summer cottages. And besides that, Romans is not light reading; some parts of it are, quite frankly, among the most difficult passages in the whole Bible. While we actually have one more week left with our friend Paul and the Church in Rome, I am going to conclude my series *this week*, because as you know, next weekend will mark the tenth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11, and I want to be able to focus on the gospel reading next weekend as we remember that day. Obviously we'll still read and hear the epistle next weekend, but I'll just let it be.

So here we are on this Labor Day weekend, eleven weeks later: five sermons by me and five by Jill; today is lucky number eleven. We could turn it into a book, like *Tuesdays with Morrie*: "Sundays with Paul." Anyone who made it here for all eleven sermons deserves a gold star!

We've covered a lot of ground. But today, as we come to the end, I want to go small and focus in on just two sentences. In this third, and last, section of Romans, Paul is still exploring this question of what it means to live one's faith in the context of Roman imperial power, still exploring this question of how a diverse group of people from very different backgrounds can "be the church" together as a light to the world. And then he says this:

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." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Sometimes people draw distinctions between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul. Jesus told memorable stories and parables; Paul tends to prefer theological reflection. Jesus tended to be rather pithy; Paul tends to be fairly long-winded. But when it gets to the heart of the matter, Jesus and Paul are of one mind. *The Christian faith and life is about love.* Not the sappy, sentimental kind of love expressed in a Hallmark card, but the hard, challenging work of being patient and kind and gentle in a world that has its fair share of impatience, rudeness, and harshness. The Bible is never “abstract” about love. It’s not a sentiment or a feeling; it’s about how we live our lives, sometimes in the face of great difficulties.

When Jesus is challenged by the religious authorities of his day, he says the very same thing that we hear Paul say here. It shouldn’t be a surprise: both are faithful Jews and that is what the Old Testament says. The whole Torah is really just two big commandments: *Love God, and love your neighbor.* And in truth, even these two are one, in the same way that a coin has two sides. You can’t love God (whom we can’t see) without loving our neighbor (whom we can see). And when you show love to your neighbor, you are expressing your love for God. As Jesus put it: “whenever you do it to these least of these, you do it to me...”

So this love of God and love of neighbor are of one piece. That is why, as the Fourth Gospel remembers the last night of Jesus’ life, he takes the towel and the water and he says...

*...look I don’t have a lot of time left. And if I’ve learned anything at all in my ministry it is that you are not the smartest lot in the world. So let me keep it really simple here. I am going to wash your feet. You should wash each others’ feet. You should work at getting rid of the distinctions that divide the world into master and servant, and just love your neighbor. Just love each other. That’s all I ask of you: one commandment; a novum mandatum--just love each other.*

Paul’s reiteration of this commandment in I Corinthians 13 may be more poetic than what he says in Romans 13, but it’s the very same thing. He is saying that love isn’t some emotion you fall into, or out of. It’s what you do; it’s how you choose to act. It’s in the tone of your voice and the way you work through conflict. *Love is does not insist on its own way but rejoices in the right...*

So “who is my neighbor?” Jesus was once asked that very question. I imagine that the guy asking him the question expected to be pushed. He knew when he asked the question that Jesus liked to hang out with some unusual people, so I’m sure he didn’t expect Jesus to respond, “*just love your own kind. Stick with the people with whom you agree in your gated community and that will be good enough...*” He probably even expected Jesus to say something like, “*you know...it needs to extend pretty far. You have to love even Samaritans...I know that’s hard, but that’s what the Scriptures say.*”

Because that *is* what the Scriptures say; in both Testaments. In the First Testament, it says over and over again that you must show hospitality to the stranger. You must treat even the stranger as you would treat family. Why? Because of the story we’ve been hearing again from Exodus, how once-

upon-a-time, way back in Egypt-land, you were strangers. You were nobody, and people treated you like dirt. So remember what that was like; remember who you are and where you've come from so that when you see a stranger (even if they talk with an accent, even if they don't have a green card) you will remember that they are fellow human beings, also created in God's own image. They are your neighbors. *Love them.*

Jesus could have said all of that. And in fact a lot of Christians think that that is what the story of the Good Samaritan says. But as I read it, that parable is even more radical and even more dangerous than that. As Jesus was wont to do, that parable turns the world upside down. Sometimes just reiterating the "rule" doesn't change hearts, so what Jesus is doing is trying to get people to see the world differently, so they *want* to change.

A closer reading of that parable shows us that Jesus doesn't let the man asking that question about being a neighbor keep his worldview intact. Instead, Jesus asks him to imagine the Kingdom of God breaking in. He asks him to imagine being vulnerable, instead of so smug. He asks him to imagine what it would be like if he was walking on a dangerous road, in the part of town where when you hit a red light you don't stop. He asks him to imagine what it would be like if he got mugged and was beaten and left in a ditch to die. He asks him to imagine himself not as a good neighbor, *but as someone in need of one.*

And then he takes it up a notch by reminding the man that probably the people most like him—the clergy and the lawyers—will be the people who will be most fearful of him if he's lying on the side of the road half-dead and they don't recognize him as they quickly cross to the other side of the road. (Lawyers and clergy don't come off very well in the Bible.) The whole point of Jesus' story, of course, is that it's some illegal immigrant who stops and gets out of his car and helps. It is that person, the despised and feared Samaritan, who acts like a neighbor. And Jesus says, "go and act like that." We won't always get it right, but that is what the Christian life aspires to: neighborly love, not in theory but in practice; in the streets.

So good old Paul, in the thirteenth chapter of Romans—the Biblical scholar trained as a Pharisee who knows the Torah through and through, and who could easily name all the Commandments if he was a finalist on Jeopardy—he comes to the heart of the matter. If you've missed church for eleven weeks and have heard nothing about Romans, you can still get the punch line. He tells the Church in Rome and us who are here today:

Just keep it simple. The commandments are all of a piece. *Just love your neighbor.* That's how you fulfill the Torah. Go and do that!