

## September 6, 2020 (Focus: Romans 13:8-14)

I have heard it said in a couple of different ways as of late that to love our neighbors is not the greatest commandment...that is, love of God is greatest commandment, and then it is pointed out that in one version in the gospel that this is separate from the love of neighbor. However, it is clear from a full reading of scripture, from the ancestors to the prophets to Jesus to Paul and others, that love of God is not separate from love of neighbor...we can't love God if we don't care about our neighbor, and not caring about our neighbor shows we do not love God, for God loves our neighbors....

I have a theory about why it is so hard for us to live up to this greatest commandment; it is likely not an original theory, but let me see what you think.

I think it is difficult for humanity to live up to the greatest commandment because it is too abstract to love God, and too real to love our neighbors.

To love God...what does that really mean, as a concept in and of itself?

To love our neighbors...well, that requires a lot of us, and for some they find their neighbors difficult to love. Some find it hard to love their neighbors because they need so much, how could we possibly have that much caring and compassion? Some find it hard to love their neighbors because they are so different from us, so other, that to have a connection with them seems impossible. Some are not easy to love because they do such terrible things that how could we possibly love them. Some are not easy to love because they are so invisible to us, we hardly notice them.

For some, they were not brought up to love one another; they were brought up to believe that we just need to take care of ourselves, just do what is best for us individually, and the rest will sort itself out. They can only do for others if those others have already done something for them, or can return the favor, or can be loyal to them. For them everything is a transaction where the guiding question is "what is in it for me?" They cannot imagine someone sacrificing for someone else or sacrificing for something greater than themselves alone.

They cannot understand that we are created to be relational, interconnected, and when we are acting in concert with one another, mutually caring for one another, that is when we are at our best, as we were created to be. We have these individual bodies, but we were made to be one creation. We have a long way to go to live this ideal out.

And we have a long way to go to understand that loving our neighbor comes in many forms. Sometimes it comes in how we treat them, how we welcome them. Sometimes it is about helping them out. Sometimes it is about speaking up for them. And sometimes it is about getting angry, yes, angry, so that we fully name and call out that which is not love. Quote shared with you at end of the bulletin, thought to ponder. From *Kaj Munk, Danish pastor killed by the Gestapo in 1944 (quoted in The Irresistible Revolution by Shane Claiborne) but just as true today.*

"What is therefore, our task today? Shall I answer: 'Faith, hope and love'? That sounds beautiful. But I would say--courage. No--even that is not challenging enough to be the whole truth. Our task today is recklessness. For what we Christians lack is not psychology or literature....we lack a holy rage--the recklessness which comes from the knowledge of God and humanity. The ability to rage when justice lies prostrate on the streets, and when the lie rages across the face of the earth...a holy anger about the things that are wrong in the world. To rage against the ravaging of God's earth, and the destruction of God's world. To rage when little children must die of hunger when the tables of the rich are sagging with food. To rage at the lie that calls the threat of death and the strategy of destruction peace. To rage against complacency. To restlessly seek to change human history until it conforms to the norms of the Kingdom of God."

Paul wrote a lot about love of neighbor in his letter to the Romans, for he was writing to a new church start that was living in difficult times in a challenging place, right at the heart of empire where it was all about who was loyal to whom and all about transactional relationships (I will help you if you help me). He knew they lived in a place where humanity had a long way to go to live into the ideal of the great commandment. As Paul puts it, the night is far gone...yes, I think we can say we know a little about that sense of being in a dark night that seems to be lasting a long time...but Paul encouraged them, and us, that...the day is near...that God intends good for the world, and intends for us and so many like us to foster that good into the world...it is easier said than believed, but we will try...let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...let us shine the beacon of light...as with the dawn, the light is spreading, the light is contagious.