

“Except to Love One Another”

Romans 13:8-14

Communion Sunday

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

⁹The 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.”

¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near.

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Sermon

Noah Van Niel recently wrote, in an article aimed at church pastors,ⁱ

“None of the options we’re presently offered for proceeding can completely alleviate [peoples’] frustration.”

He mentions the possibility of opening churches up with no restrictions, but quotes Paul writing to the church in Corinth, “Now in the following instructions, I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse” (I Corinthians 11:17), and Van Niel says, “I think [Paul] would count potentially spreading a disease as infectious and deadly as the coronavirus as ‘for the worse.’”ⁱⁱ

Then Van Niel mentions partial-opening possibilities, wherein only a fortunate few can attend, and there’s still no singing and no handshakes or hugs or even sitting near each other, all of which is, at best, “a minimally satisfying in-person worship experience” that only serves to emphasize the “fractures in the community as well as feelings of division and loneliness.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And then he mentions this—using livestream or recorded services—to try to make our way through the time when “the church has to keep being the church *without the physical gathering that has **always** been at its heart.*

“Instead of a satisfying way forward,” he says, “we are left with a desire that cannot be met. An absence that cannot be filled. A yearning that is perpetual.

“But what if that were its own instructive place to dwell?

“In an age of immediate gratification, we may be used to getting what we need relatively quickly,” he says, “but in our spiritual tradition, the concept of holy longing is not new.

“We long for heaven while we are on earth.

“We long for peace in a world of war.

“We long for justice in a world that continually frustrates those aims.

“We long for God yet [we meet God] only sparingly.”

He said, “The great mystical theologians speak at length about the sense of unfulfilled desire at the heart of their prayer life. Gregory of Nyssa [calls longing] the force that continually propels us toward God;

“Julian of Norwich calls it a ‘thirst’;

Teresa of Ávila calls it the ‘wound of love,’ which comes from God and is meant to draw us back to God.

“In this time of frustration,” says Van Niel, “the perpetual yearning we know so well could be preparing us for something even greater.”^{iv}

“You know what time it is,” Paul wrote to the church in Rome. “How it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” (Romans 13:11).

“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’” (Romans 13:9).

How do you experience love in your life, right now?

Is it an ever-present force, or a faded memory, or a magnetic draw toward a future promise?

Do you feel it most prominently in the people around you, or in the privacy of your unique relationship with God, or as an acceptance of yourself, with all your beauty and your flaws and your idiosyncrasies

and everything else that simultaneously makes you like everyone else and unlike anyone else?

When did you learn love? Who were the people who first showed it to you, and how?

We don't always get it totally right; a lot of times, we get it completely wrong. How, when and with whom have you gotten it right, at least in some ways?

Is there anyone who comes now into your thoughts about whom you are inclined to take a moment to acknowledge your love for them, whatever that may mean to you?

Where do you wish you could see it more right now, in the world and in your life?

I find that a lot of times when I think about specific people who come to mind when I think about love—about loving, or being loved, or knowing something that can't be articulated about what love means—

I think of people who gave something up, who sacrificed something, who allowed themselves in some way to have something broken that meant a lot to them—whether it was breaking the flow of their day to talk to me, or breaking down a wall of separation, or allowing love to break into their life like the dawn breaking into the world every morning.

In Luke's gospel (22:14-20), When the hour came, Jesus and the apostles took their places at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

And the bread is broken, for the healing of the world: of the rift between humanity and God, of the brokenness of each of us and our brokenness with one another and life itself.

In Paul’s earliest known letter, I Thessalonians, he said God has destined us not for wrath, but for salvation—through Jesus, who died for us. So encourage one another and build each other up, as indeed you are doing.

And the broken life of Christ restores unity between us and God, between us and each other, between us and ourselves.

In all of our locations, we are the Church, and the table is present in all the places where we are.

And the broken bread brings everyone in, and makes the circle whole.

As always, but maybe especially in these polarizing times, when our displacement seems to have all of us at least somewhat frazzled,

God offers us the Word; gives us the gift of the Church—the body of Christ—and gives Christ himself for us, for all who are wounded—spiritually, mentally, emotionally, physically, as an oasis, as a M*A*S*H unit, as a shelter in the night, and a quiet in the storm.

Somehow in our shared separation, we are especially united.

Around the year we identify as 49 A.D., or C.E., the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. Mention is made in contemporaneous reports “that Roman Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, so [Emperor] Claudius ordered them out.”^v Many historians believe that means the Jews from the young Church were sent out while the non-Jews stayed in Rome.

A few years later, they returned, but apparently it was an uneasy reunion in the Roman church between the Jewish Christians who were returning and the non-Jewish Christians who had remained—mutual trust and understanding had crumbled, and it wasn’t going well.

So Paul wasn’t just offering a random daily meditation when he wrote to everyone in that persecuted and fractured church:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Owe no one anything. That’s not a statement about mortgages or microloans or borrowing a couple of eggs from a neighbor. Nor does it cancel out the idea of respecting and honoring that which is worthy—we *owe* it to the people who came before us to make the most of our lives; we *owe* it to the planet’s children and all our fellow creatures to leave them a world that is not ruined by selfish carelessness and destructive greed.

What he’s saying is about not withholding love.

Don’t owe somebody an apology; apologize. Don’t owe someone a debt of gratitude; thank them. Don’t owe allegiance to someone or something on some technicality, like a medieval oath. Treat everybody with respect and live up to the promise of your humanity, not down to your

basest fears about losing your privileges and surpluses, or having them taken from you.

Owe no one anything except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor. So love is the fulfilling of God's law.

And we know what time it is, says Paul: how now is the moment for us to wake up—to live and speak and act as honorable people, not debasing ourselves or the people around us, not in quarreling and jealousy.

John Green has said, “I don't know a perfect person. I only know flawed people who are still worth loving.”^{vi}

Jesus breaks the bread, and suddenly we are made whole. Jesus is broken on the cross, and the world is saved. Jesus' body is before us now in bread and cup, and the circle around the table is made wider, stronger, and more encompassing than ever.

And, who knows: Maybe this perpetual yearning could be preparing us for something even greater.^{vii}

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ⁱ Noah Van Niel, “The Church Is Other People: Why We Need to Gather in Person.” Plough Quarterly, August 12, 2020 (https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/the-church-is-other-people?utm_source=dig&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=0904)

ⁱⁱ Van Niel, “The Church Is Other People”

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Niel, “The Church Is Other People”

^{iv} Van Niel, “The Church Is Other People”

^v Ann Jervis, “The Letter of Paul to the Romans,” in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Fifth Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2011.

^{vi} I haven't read Green's *Looking for Alaska*, but this quote of his is all over the internet and I have yet to see it properly attributed. *Looking for Alaska* would be a reasonable first guess.

^{vii} Van Niel, “The Church Is Other People”