

LOVE AS LABOR

the Rev. Seth Patterson

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Minister for Spiritual Formation & Theater

Text: Romans 13:8–14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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. Besides 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; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on Jesus Christ, and make no provision to gratify your desires.

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Happy Labor Day weekend, everyone! It is the end of the summer here in Minnesota, and we are in that cusp time as we trail out of summer and begin to slip into autumn. Love is everywhere! And it is in desperately short supply. There are beautiful and moving stories of people working together, sharing resources, listening deeply. There are stories of incredible personal change as well as community-led movements to change toxic and oppressive systems. People are incredible and full of love! There are also stories of people acting with unchecked greed, power being abused and hatred being celebrated as if it’s a virtue. There are stories of awful actions and beliefs and attempts to corral all of us into pens of fear. People can be awful and devoid of love!

Such is life, right? The tension of living in community with others. The tension of simply being a human being. The tension of being an animal with the God-given abilities to imagine and create and destroy more than any other animal on this planet. We live with the tension of fear with hope, anger with joy, health with illness. In the spectrum of these extremes, we often find ourselves sitting somewhere in the middle and being pulled, caught in the tension.

That tension, that sometimes-uncomfortable feeling of stretch, can be difficult to acknowledge and paradoxical. It’s like being in a tree and having to hold two different branches so as to not fall. In our best moments, we are able to see these extremes as being sets of competing truths, and the tension is palatable—we can swing between the branches, so to speak. But in times of stress, when we feel saturated and overwhelmed, it is a very human response to try and get rid of these tensions. We seem to do one of two things: Either we move out of the tension and try to sit on one end of the spectrum. We choose an extreme branch to sit upon. This is where we find the immovable absolutes—this is absolutely right and that is absolutely wrong. Alternatively, we try to merely ignore the discomfort of this tension. We pretend it’s not there. We build a sling between the two branches and hang passively. This passivity can create indifference, and indifference is akin to death.

Rev. Dr. King said as much in a sermon in Selma in 1965, the day after civil rights protesters were attacked and beaten by police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. King preached, “A man dies when he refuses to stand

up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.”

If this indifference is like dying, then what is life-giving? What might be the opposite of indifference? Elie Wiesel offers that the opposite of indifference is love. He wrote, “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.”

When we are too saturated in our lives to live in the tensions that are present, we run the risk of indifference. This is death-like, but the life-giving opposite of indifference is love. Love, though, is complicated. It is stretching between vulnerability and certainty. Still, as we hear again in our scripture today, it is the greatest commandment. It is repeated in this Epistle to the Romans that it is commanded that we love the other as we love ourselves. This letter was very likely written by the Apostle Paul to a community of Jesus-followers in Rome about 20 or 30 years after Jesus was killed by the Empire. Paul restates this essential teaching for these followers, reminding them that in order to follow the commandments given through Moses, one must be centered in love. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

These are powerful thoughts on the necessity of love from Paul, and they can stand alone as an inspiring reminder. Yet, they do not stand alone. They fall within the larger narrative of the letter, and that context adds layers to these few sentences. In the section before this (which I did not read), Paul tells the Romans to submit to the authorities in Rome because they are “servants to God,” because “the authorities that exist have been established by God.” Subsequently, our section on love is then followed by a section (which I did read) that says that the end is coming soon, so they should be preparing themselves.

These other two sections can be incredibly complicated to contemporary listeners. They were likely complicated to first-century listeners as well. Today it seems outside the theology of this particular church to believe that all governments, whether Roman or American, were established and unequivocally sanctioned by God. It is also outside the theology of our church to be preparing for the imminent return of Jesus. Still, I wonder if there might be two things worth exploring in the reading of Romans chapter 13.

The first is that even though we may be uncomfortable or dismissive with the idea of Jesus’s return, this call to wake up is still important. I am not alone in wondering if we are all sitting at the crossroads of a profound potential change. We are at one of those moments in history when we must all choose which change is coming. This is likely one of those moments when we cannot avoid the change. The fact of change is inevitable, but we cannot necessarily depend on the inevitability that the change will be positive. To be followers of Jesus right now we must choose the change that God wishes for us. We cannot be passive, we cannot be indifferent. We must consume less and stop making human beings a commodified object if we are to follow the one who tells us to give up everything and follow him. We must change our societal systems to no longer marginalize and oppress the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the non-dominant—those whom Jesus called blessed. We must do the hard work to love ourselves and see our own innate value, in order to love those whom we see as others and their inherent value. We must, in the words of Paul, “put on Jesus Christ” in the ways that we show up in our world. And we must do it now, because some sort of change is coming.

The second is the fact that this reminder of the greatest commandment is the connecting piece in a conversation between the authority of human governments and our spiritual desires. Swinging firmly between these competing ideas is love. Occupying this space of stretching tension is the demand that we love ourselves and we love those whom we consider to be others. Love is central. Love is in the tension. Love may very well be the tension.

If we do not become indifferent to this tension of being a living human then we must love! We must fulfill the old laws on which our faith was built with love. This is not a passive indifference that we conveniently label as love, but we must actively work for love and in love. This love for ourselves and the others around us is active and present and difficult. It can be uncomfortable. This love looks like giving especially when it is difficult to do so. This love looks like showing up even when it might be uncomfortable to do so. This love looks like praying even when it can feel fruitless to do so. This love looks like sharing a meal with people you do not know, the breaking of bread and the passing of cup in hopeful mutuality. This love has its eyes open and is awake, and being wide awake and seeing clearly is not always pleasant. This love is a labor. Yet it is the best work that we can do. It is the work that we are called to do. It is the work we must do.

As we celebrate this Labor Day weekend, may we all find ways to be reinvigorated to the hard work of love—to love as labor. If we want to make something, we must do so with love. If we want to be alive, we must not fall into the death of indifference. Happy Love as Labor Day to you all.