**September 10, 2017**

**Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20**

Over the summer we slogged our way through the book of Romans. It is a defining book for Christian theology. Despite the many divisions in the body of Christ (from Catholic and Protestant, to Presbyterian and Baptist and Pentecostal), we all turn to this book for guidance on who is Jesus Christ, and how we shall respond to Christ. Presbyterians specifically draw language like “grace” and “predestination” from this book. Romans takes us from that sort of theoretical theology all the way down to boots-on-the-ground practical spirituality. Which is where we are today.

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Paul’s words give shape to Christ’s words in the Gospel of Matthew. The law of love is the essence of the Bible: God created us with love, loves us in our daily living, and even punishes us with love. Love is at the root of all of God’s action. The Law of love defines us. It guides our being and doing – from the Ten Commandments through the Gospel, love is the heart of who God is and how we respond to God. Love is how we live our daily lives, how we treat ourselves, how we interact with friend and neighbor, and how we interact with strangers. We love because God loved us. Love is even how we act in times of disagreement. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor,” but when *sin* does wrong to a neighbor, go [lovingly] to that person and find reconciliation.

These verses aren’t advocating continual conversation about ever minor annoyance – that’s exhausting and a sure way to end relationships – but if our relationship is broken, we have a responsibility to address it. If a major foul was committed, if harm was done, if a relationship is broken, it needs to be addressed. God does not want us to persist in brokenness. Although brokenness is the path of least resistance (it takes effort to pursue reconciliation), to live with grumbling and apathy, and to maintain barriers is to remain in sin.

Sin causes divorce and name-calling and finger-pointing and self-hatred.

Sin caused the troubles in Charlottesville, Virginia. Sin was the foundation of the wall that built white supremacy. Sin was the building blocks of hatred and dis-ease with neighbor and stranger alike. Sin kept people from listening to one another, only allowing them to yell across the divide.

Sin caused the formation of ISIS. Sin kept nations in a quest for military and weaponry, instead of pursuing peaceful causes like education and fair business practices. Sin kept poverty high so that people desperately reached for anything to alleviate their pain, even violence. Sin perpetrated a myth of hierarchy between races and cultures.

Sin caused the things in your life (and mine) that we don’t want to name but we know are not right. We are not meant to live this way. We are not meant to live in brokenness.

God wants wholeness for us individually, and for us in communities. Jesus actually *commanded* community. Real community, not just polite associations or nice acquaintances, but real and deep community that cares for creation in a way that pulls us into God’s redemptive and reconciling presence in the world. This is the community that everyone craves. Children, youth, young adults and middle aged and older adults. People are desperate for real, honest community that matters and makes a difference. Community that comforts and sustains. The type of community that does not bail when the going gets tough; community sticks with it and works through the tough. Lovingly. Respectfully. But because this community doesn’t just cut and run, because people can’t get away with anything in this community, it costs us to participate. If we follow Jesus’s command, it is going to cost us. Real relationships where truth is told and burdens are shared – that’s costly. Real relationships are worth the discomfort and unease of telling the truth.

Real relationships – like that between the persons of the Triune God, and like that between the Triune God and creation – are guided by the Law of Love. And in as much, real relationships practice forgiveness and reconciliation. Just as God forgave us for our sin and brokenness, so we should forgive one another. (“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”) Just as it was costly for God to forgive (it cost Jesus his life), it is costly for us to forgive. It costs humility and gentleness and compassion. It also costs any claim to revenge.

The Cherokee nation has a story about the two wolves within each of us vying for control of our souls – one wolf uses anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, and such, while the other wolf uses goodness, benevolence, generosity, truth – the things we call the “fruits of the spirit”. As the people feel the two wolves wrestling within them and wonder which wolf will win, a wise elder replied, “The one you feed.” “The wolf you feed.”

What “one” do you feed in your life? The loving or snarling wolf? What wolf does our Sweet Hollow community feed?

Paul wrote to the Romans that while this Law of Love is the way we should live, it is not easy. In fact, we need “armor” to do so. “Put on the armor of light… Jesus Christ… and do not satisfy your human desires.” Armor is heavy, not a simple garment that flows around you. Armor is not figure flattering; it does not look pretty, but protects you for external wounds. As we attempt to live into this Law of Love, we must protect ourselves from the wolves in the world and the wolves within us that will seek to wound us. We must ignore the snarling wolf within us, and feed the one who loves beyond measure, who seeks peace and pursues reconciliation with ourselves, God, and others.

[[1]](#footnote-1) “There’s one last thing Jesus said about this – he said that if reconciliation doesn’t work, let the sinner be like a tax collector or a gentile to you. But remember – Jesus had a thing for tax collectors and gentiles. He sought them out. He ate with them and talked with them when no one else would. So when we’ve exhausted Jesus’s teachings, when reconciliation is still elusive, when it seems impossible to love the one who sinned against you, remember that Jesus isn’t exhausted yet. And that is good news. That is the promise of the Gospel: God is never done with us. God is never done with others. God always leaves room for love. God always has love to share.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Powery, Luke. [Interpretation](javascript:__doLinkPostBack('','mdb~~a6h%7C%7Cjdb~~a6hjnh%7C%7Css~~JN%20%22Interpretation%22%7C%7Csl~~jh','');), 62 no 2 Apr 2008, p 134-144 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)