



All You Need Is Love!

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 6, 2020*

Exodus 12:1-14

YHWH said to Aaron and Moses in the land of Egypt, “This month will be the first of all months to you. You will count it as the first month of the year. Say this to the whole community of Israel: On the tenth day of this month, every family in Israel will take an animal from the flock, one for each household. If your household is too small for a whole animal, join with your next door neighbor, and divide the animal as the number of persons requires. The animal must be a year-old male without blemish. You may take it from either the sheep or the goats. You must keep it until the fourteenth day of the month,§ then the whole community of Israel is to slaughter it at sunset. Some of the blood must then be taken and applied to the two doorposts and the lintel of every house where the animal is eaten.

“That night you will eat the roasted flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled, but roasted over the fire—the head, feet and entrails. You must not leave any over until morning. Whatever is left in the morning, you are to burn. “This is how you are to eat it: with your belt buckled, your sandals on your feet, and a staff in your hand; you will eat it in haste. It is the Passover of YHWH. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night and strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. I will execute this judgment on all the gods of Egypt: I am YHWH. The blood will mark the houses where you live. When I see the blood I will pass over you, and no harm will come to you when I strike the land of Egypt. “This day will be for you a memorial day, and you must celebrate it as a feast to YHWH. All generations are to observe it forever as a feast day.

Psalm 149

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| 1 Alleluia! Sing to God a new song; *
sing praise in the congregation of the faithful. | 6 Let the praises of God be in their throat *
and a two-edged sword in their hand, |
| 2 Let the people of Israel rejoice in their Maker; *
let the children of Zion be joyful in their Monarch. | 7 To wreak vengeance on the nations *
and punishment on the peoples; |
| 3 Let them praise God's Name in the dance; *
let them sing praise with timbrel and harp. | 8 To bind their rulers in chains *
and their nobles with links of iron; |
| 4 For God takes pleasure in the people *
and adorns the poor with victory. | 9 To inflict on them the judgment decreed; *
this is glory for all God's faithful people. Alleluia! |
| 5 Let the faithful rejoice in triumph; *
let them be joyful on their beds. | |

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no debt to anyone—except the debt that binds us to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you have fulfilled the Law. The commandments—no committing adultery, no killing, no stealing, no coveting, and all the others—are all summed up in this one: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love never wrongs anyone—hence love is the fulfillment of the Law.

Besides, you know the time in which we are living. It is now the hour for you to wake from sleep, for our salvation is closer than when we first accepted the faith. The night is far spent; the day draws near. So let us cast off deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live honorably as in daylight, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with our Savior Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the night.

Matthew 16:21-28

“If your sister or brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out the error, but keep it between the two of you. If she or he listens to you, you have won a loved one back; if not, try again, but take one or two others with you, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses. If your sister or brother refuses to listen to them, refer the matter to the church. If she or he ignores even the church, then treat that sister or brother as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. “The truth is, whatever you declare bound on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you declare loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven. “Again I tell you, if two of you on earth join in agreement to pray for anything whatsoever, it will be granted you by my Abba God in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst.

At first blush, the reading from Matthew's gospel and the epistle from St. Paul might seem to have very little to do with one another. Paul's text is uplifting and inspiring: a grand exhortation of the power of love to overcome all things! He does manage to sneak in reference to a bunch of the nasty stuff that love is supposed to prevent—things like adultery, killing, stealing—not to mention quarreling, jealousy, carousing, drunkenness and sexual excess—all the behaviors which have had a rather enduring quality among human beings in spite of pretty universal knowledge of the ten commandments and over two millennia of Christianity. As a supervisor of mine said early in my training when I was describing a frustrating case where I felt frustrated by my client's continuing tendency to "mess up," *Well, people just don't behave!* Indeed, many times we don't behave, and it's not because we don't know better. Still, there is an earnestness in Paul's preaching about love, and the reverence for the power of love of neighbor which "never wrongs anyone" and "is the fulfillment of the Law." Or, as the Beatles put it years ago: *All you need is love!*

When we get to Matthew's text, we move from something inspirational to something which is much more procedural and even tedious in its detail. The message seems to be that love has its limits. It is a bit odd to think of Jesus getting mired in the details of how one confronts a sinner in the community. In fact, many scholars believe this may reflect something of Matthew's instruction to his community which is framed with a kind of divine endorsement. Matthew's community existed a good number of years after Paul wrote to the Romans, by which time it was clear that Christian communities were going to be around for awhile and needed plenty of instruction about how to get along and what to do about those who strayed from the fold and were resistant to repentance. Simply continuing to preach at people about loving one another wasn't sufficient. We might call to mind another popular song here: Tina Turner's *What's Love Got to do With It?*

The truth is, as Christians, our track record on keeping the simplest of commandments: *Love your neighbor as yourself* is rather dismal. We often act as if Jesus' core teaching was merely a polite suggestion. Like many of the most confrontational sayings of Jesus, it gets treated as a kind of aspirational but utterly impractical goal. I remember a while back hearing an evangelical Christian quoted as saying: *Well, the Beatitudes are nice, but God doesn't expect us to live by them.* I suspect that this would come as a surprise to God. I don't mean to throw stones. There are all kinds of ways the best of us minimize, rationalize and simply deny the importance of loving our neighbor and our enemies.

Matthew's text turns out to be about love after all. It reflects the reality that people do not behave and that alienation happens in communities. What is outlined as a procedural way of loving—of caring for the lost sheep—but also accepting the reality that we can do only so much. The rest is in God's hands. Ruptures between human beings occur, even among the most well-meaning of folk. The important thing is to be committed to the repair of the break, to the grace of reconciliation. In loving, both in its immediate manifestation and as displayed through a commitment to reconciliation, we are taking up the action of divine mercy. That's what makes the final lines in the gospel so interesting. This fusion between bounding and loosing on earth as in heaven has often been interpreted as Jesus delegating a certain power to the church to act in Jesus' absence. Like people sent off to far away places in the days when easy communication was not possible. Unfortunately, this "power" which was ratified for the church as a whole became more and more restricted to a hierarchical class, who became the overseers of the less endowed. Perhaps we might understand this not as a delegation but as an identification between the living membership of Christ's body and Christ as God's full present. All of our acts of love and reconciliation are nothing less than the manifestation of the holiness of God in our midst. So it only makes sense that we should strive to *live honorably* in this truth. When we love, nothing more can be added. Nothing greater can be perfected. Even when love is refused, God is made flesh. True, people just don't behave. Human beings are remarkable stubborn and prone to doing dumb things. But God is always coming toward us, pursuing us, reminding us that sometimes the most simple idea is the most profound: *All you need is love.*