

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)
Romans 13.8-14
September 3, 2005
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

To me, the greatest horror left behind in Hurricane Katrina's path was not leveled homes, destroyed bridges or even lost lives. It was "man's inhumanity to man," the looting, yes, but even more so the sniping at rescue helicopters and rescuers themselves. There was something totally chilling about those scenarios, something wrong, out-of-sync, evil.

"You shall not murder" is the fifth commandment. It is mentioned by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, from which today's epistle comes. I remember when I first learned the commandments in grammar school that it was a relief to come across one that I wasn't apt to violate. I had never been tempted to kill anyone and didn't expect I ever would be. I knew I was in much greater danger of not honoring my mother and my father or of telling a lie than of murdering somebody. I thought, "Phew, there's one I don't need to worry about!" But then as I grew older I realized I was dumbing down the commandment by saying I'd necessarily kept it just because I hadn't stabbed, shot, poisoned, or intentionally run over anybody.

Then I entered seminary, read *The Small Catechism* and heard Martin Luther echoing my sentiments. Listen to his explanation of the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder."

What is this?

Answer: We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, **but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.**

It's not enough that we refrain from shooting at rescue helicopters and at each other. We must have the heart of rescuers who put their lives on the line for folks whose names they don't know, who recognize all people as "kin," embracing them as part of the same race, the **human** race.

The first line of today's epistle is:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.... (Rom. 13.8)

The translation of that verse in *The Message* is:

Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other.

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The only way to make good on the debt of love is to love. There is no substitute currency for paying it off. And we need to realize we never **will** "pay it off," because the debt is too enormous. We can't declare emotional bankruptcy either, hoping the debt will be forgiven. The debt of our **sins** is forgiven, but the debt of **love** never **will** be paid.

You see, the one we **really** owe the debt to is our God, not our neighbor. But the finest way of loving God **is** to love our neighbor, in whom God resides. God doesn't need anything material, touchable, tastable, smellable, from us. But the people in New Orleans need bottled water and children in our inner cities need health care and AIDS patients in Africa need medicine. **God** doesn't need any of those things, but God's **children** do.

This epistle begs for me to point out the obvious: **love is more action than emotion**. Here's how one Bible commentator puts it:

...[T]he word "love" has undergone [perversion] in our society... The problem is that the word "love" has been so

captured by Hollywood producers and the romantic novelists that it has come to mean either sheer sentimentality or else the feeling that comes over a person when an attractive member of the opposite sex comes into view. **Love has therefore come to be identified with an emotional state.** That is not what the New Testament means by “love.” That God loves us hardly means that he gets a warm feeling inside when he thinks of us ☺. We know God loves us not because of the way he *feels* about us but because of what he has *done* for us: He gave his son for our redemption.

What Paul and the rest of the New Testament mean by love therefore centers not on emotions but on actions. To love someone is actively to promote that person’s good. To be commanded to love one’s enemy means that one is commanded to work for that person’s good, not harm. To love an enemy therefore does not mean primarily to change one’s emotional state toward that person so much as it means to do good for that enemy, regardless of what one’s emotional response to that person may happen to be. **Love acts for the good of another.** *That* is the love Paul speaks of here, and that is the love that fulfills the law.

(Interpretation, Romans, pp. 208-09)

“Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other.” Love in deeds, not just in words. When I was an undergraduate at Notre Dame, one of the priests wrote a book about marriage. On the face of it, one might question his credentials to do that. But I have to say, he got it right. Thirty years later, I remember a piece of advice he offered his male readers. It was something along these lines: “Don’t forget you can also make love to your wife by cleaning the bathtub or getting up in the middle of the night to clean up after your child who has just thrown up.”

Samuel Johnson knew that love is more than the absence of malice, more than **not** shooting at rescuers. He said:

“To do no harm is the praise of a stone, not a man.”

Of course we shouldn’t **draw** blood by popping someone in the nose, but if we’re able shouldn’t we actually **give** blood so that someone may live? “Don’t run up debts, except

for the huge debt of love you owe each other.” My dad used to give blood regularly; he’s now 89 and no longer able to donate. I remember marveling once at how many units he had donated and saying to him, “But you don’t really **mind** donating, do you?” And he confessed that he dreaded giving, each and every time.

I’m blessed to know why he gave **anyway**. After my mother’s death from leukemia I found a newspaper clipping among her things, a letter she had written to the local newspaper editor, thanking the first aid squad for transporting her to the hospital during a crisis, and also thanking all who had donated blood in her name. My mom was only sick for nine months before she died, so I can’t imagine she received **all** that many pints of blood along the way. But in order to whittle away his debt of gratitude, my dad donated gallons of blood over the next thirty years. When I turned 18 I jumped on the wagon train, too, continuing the family tradition, chipping away at the huge debt of love that we owe.

Hear this: it is not enough to do no harm. We must be of some earthly good, not in a futile attempt to earn the salvation that has already been won for us, but in response to God’s goodness to us, the gift of Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross. We are forever and joyfully indebted. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson

