

In Other Words

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Romans 13:8-10 Common English Bible ⁸ Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. ¹⁰ Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

In 1888 the Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde penned a fairy tale called "The Happy Prince."

The Prince in this story was nothing more than an exquisite statue, gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold. He looked down on his city with priceless blue sapphire eyes and guarded his domain with a sword bejeweled with an enormous red ruby. From his tall column the Happy Prince statue kept watch over his people.

One night a small swallow, lost on his yearly migration to the warm regions of Egypt, landed wearily at the Prince's feet to rest. But before he could fall asleep, a cascade of water began to douse him. It was tears from the eyes of the Happy Prince. From his high vantage point, the Prince could see a sick child begging his mother for an orange, while the poor woman worked with bleeding fingers embroidering a piece of fancy satin for a noble woman's ball gown.

"Swallow, please stay with me tonight and be my messenger," begged the Prince. "That boy is so thirsty, and the mother so sad." The little bird agreed. Doing as the Prince instructed, the bird took the fabulous ruby from its sword hilt and dropped it on the table next to the thimble of the woman.

The next day, the Happy Prince begged the swallow to be his messenger once again. The Prince had seen a young writer so cold and hungry and despairing that he could no longer hold his pen. This time, the Prince had the swallow take one of his beautiful sapphire eyes to the poor young man so that he could buy food and firewood and finish his play.

On the third day, the Happy Prince, with his one remaining eye, spied a pitiful little match girl. She was sobbing because she had dropped her matches in the gutter and now had nothing to sell. She knew her father would beat her for her carelessness. Again, the Prince convinced the swallow to stay and play the messenger for him. Reluctantly, the little bird plucked out the Prince's second sapphire eye and delivered it into the weeping girl's hands.

The swallow knew he could not leave the now-blind Prince. So he stayed on, acting as the Prince's eyes and one-by-one pulling off [pieces of] the gold [leaf] covering the Prince's body to give them to those who were suffering and hurting, cold and hungry.

Finally, on one freezing day, the Prince was completely stripped of all his riches. He had given everything - his ruby, his sapphires, his gold, to those in need. The swallow too had given his all. The cold he should have flown away from long ago penetrated his body. With a parting kiss to the Happy Prince's lips, the swallow fell dead at his feet. At that moment, the leaden heart of the Happy Prince statue snapped in two.

Disgusted at the ugly eyesore the statue had become, the people of the city tore it down and melted it in the furnace. But the broken lead heart refused to melt. They scrapped it and threw it in the dust heap next to the body of the dead swallow.

Looking down on the earth, God said to one of his angels, "Bring me the two most precious things in that city." The angel returned to God with the leaden heart and the dead bird. "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise the little bird shall sing forevermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me"¹

Oscar Wilde's fairy tale depicts love not as an emotion but as a commitment to caring for another. That's the same message we hear from the apostle Paul in today's scripture passage from Romans Chapter 13.

Now I have to confess that I find Paul's writings aren't always easy to understand. St. Paul was a prolific writer and marvelous missionary and inexhaustible church planter and fierce defender of the faith. The Christian faith established a firm foundation and spread far beyond its roots in Jerusalem... in large part because of the work of Paul. But the fact is that sometimes the legal training of Paul's early years is evident in his theological presentations. Some of his arguments can seem to go around in circles. In short, parts of his writings can be hard to understand, no matter how many times you read them... over and over!

But in this brief passage from Romans Chapter 13 Paul's message is simple and it's clear: showing love for others is the heart of following the way of Jesus. When a Pharisee asked Jesus what the most important commandment was and Jesus answered in part, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," Jesus wasn't simply tossing out a clever thought that would look good on a t-shirt or refrigerator magnet. He was confirming for his day – and for ours – instructions that God spoke to Moses as recorded in Leviticus Chapter 19, verse 18: "...You must love your neighbor as yourself; [for] I am the Lord."

Let's remember that Paul had been raised in a strictly observant Jewish home. He was knowledgeable in the Jewish scriptures which we know as the Old Testament. He understood the assumptions of Jewish community life.

Some years ago a rabbi described what those communal assumptions would have included:

He remarked that if there was a Jewish family with a need and another Jew met that need, it was not something special, it was merely his duty. It

¹ Summarized from Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince*, with illus. by Gilbert Riswold [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965]. https://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2942 accessed 8/31/2020. The original text can be found at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/902/902-h/902-h.htm>.

was something that he ought to do, not something he should receive praise for.

...That was an interesting insight. In reality, it is simply love being demonstrated on a practical level. When the Scripture calls on us to love one another, God is asking us to behave in a certain way toward one another. You see, love is not some warm, sentimental feeling we have. Love is a commitment of the will to be kind to one another, to respect one another, to help one another, and to do good to one another. Jesus taught us that love means feeding your enemy, giving your enemy a cup of cold water when he is thirsty. Jesus taught us that love means to do good to those who do not love you.²

In other words, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Christ-inspired love, then, produces intentional action. This is how one of the last century's great Christian thinkers, author C.S. Lewis, explained that love is a conscious, intentional decision to act. He wrote

Do not waste your time bothering whether you "love" your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.³

In other words, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Showing love through our actions needs to be an intentional decision, because it is our nature to try to seek the easiest, safest way in life. There's a professor at Yale Divinity School named Miroslav Volf. He's written that showing Christlike love is a decision of the heart and mind precisely because it's not the easiest path. That was made clear to him by – believe it or not – a sausage maker in Croatia. Here's how it happened: Volf was back for a visit to his native Croatia when

...He and a friend went on a quest for some sausage, and their journey took them to the home of an old man in a distant village. When they entered his kitchen, they saw an open Bible on the table, one that the man had clearly picked up and read.

The old man offered them some wine, and they started talking. Not about sausage, but about Christian life.

"Always choose a more difficult path," the old man said. A neighbor asked him to clarify what he meant, so he said, "It's easier for us to be served than to serve and to take than to give. Serving is the harder path, giving is the harder path. Because we are selfish, the path of love is always more difficult."⁴

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A few decades back a singing duo named England Dan and John Ford Coley had a hit with a song called "Love is the Answer." The bridge of the song emphasized how

² J. David Hoke, "You are in debt," January 19, 1997, *New Horizons Community Church Web Site*, horizonsnet.org. at https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93000087 accessed 9/2/2020

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* at https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040623 accessed 9/2/2020

⁴ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040623 accessed 9/2/2020

even the low points, the challenging times of our lives give us the opportunity to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

And when you feel afraid (Love one another)
 When you've lost your way (Love one another)
 And when you're all alone (Love one another)
 And when you're far from home (Love one another)
 And when you're down and out (Love one another)
 And when your hopes run out (Love one another)
 And when you need a friend (Love one another)
 And when you're near the end... [Love one another]⁵

Martin E. Marty is a world-famous church historian now retired from the University of Chicago who I had the privilege of hearing lecture on a few occasions. On the wall of his divinity school office hung a motto that he said he pondered daily. It read: "Life is short and we have not much time for gladdening the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Oh, be swift to love; make haste to be kind."⁶

In other words, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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⁵ --From England Dan and John Ford Coley, "Love Is the Answer." YouTube has several versions of them singing this song. https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93040841 accessed 9/2/2020

⁶ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=2942 accessed 8/31/2020