

Love From a Neighbor
Meditation on Romans 13:8-14
Sept. 17, 2017
Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The 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.' ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

These last 2 weeks have been kind of a blur for me. Have they been that way for you? I remember just before the storm, visiting my dad in a hospital in Orange City, with blood filling his lungs. We are hoping that he will be healed enough to be discharged tomorrow!

I remember our office staff and volunteers preparing the church for Hurricane Irma. We were bagging our computers, phones and other electronics, taking things off the floor, covering the copier with plastic, all the while not knowing if what we were doing was going to help in the event of a catastrophic storm!

We talked about whether we were staying in our homes or leaving the area. We struggled with that question. Did you have those conversations, too? Did anyone prepare to evacuate, pack up and drive somewhere, only to discover that you may have put yourself right into the path of the storm? Did any of you turn around and come back to your boarded up homes, deciding that staying was the best choice for you and your family? Did any of you leave town--go to family or friends-- after the storm when you lost power and had no water? Did any of you stay in a hotel--nice or not so nice-- just to get out of the heat and be able to flush a toilet without using water from your pool or from a bathtub filled before the storm?

I don't think it was easier for native Floridians to make the decision about leaving than it was for relative newcomers like Jim and me. For a storm of Irma's size is rare, even in this part of the country, where we have a time of year that we actually call "hurricane season." While living in Minnesota, I learned about packing cold weather kits for our cars, but here in Florida, I have learned that we need a hurricane kit that includes flashlights or lanterns and batteries , enough bottled water and nonperishable food for at least 4 days. But you also need hammers and nails and boards to cover windows and doors, towels and rags for soaking up water in the house, and plastic bags and duct tape, just because. What we didn't know was that we should have hurricane *recovery* kits of rakes and brooms, a wheelbarrow, and a man or woman with a chainsaw , preferably with a pick up truck or trailer to haul yard debris away.

What helped you as you prepared for Irma? One thing that helped me was knowing that the God of sea and sky was still with us. He hasn't abandoned us! He isn't punishing us! He strengthens and guides us through all the troubling events and storms of life. But it also helped that everyone in our congregation was preparing for the storm, too. I didn't feel alone. I had the Lord, I had my family, and I had God's people- someone to call for help, if we needed it. That encouraged me a lot. Staying connected through prayer, email, Facebook and text messages was helpful, too. I had to laugh at the Facebook photos of "hurricane snacks." I never thought of that! Jim did! He bought us mint Milano cookies and peanut M&M's!! But I kept craving brown sugar cinnamon pop tarts, after seeing the Neihouse's stash! Do you have any left?

Did neighbors, friends, or family invite you to come and stay with them, when Merritt Island was ordered to evacuate? Did you feel loved? I hope so! Did any of you welcome into your home extended family, friends, neighbors? Other people's pets? I know you did!

Were you blessed by surprising acts of kindness? I was! A young man who lives across Cone Road from the church showed up on Wednesday while Cheryl and Fred Mahan were raking leaves and dragging branches to the road! He worked for a long time with Cheryl, Bev Larsen, Leslie Mitchell and me in the sweltering heat, bringing his own wagon and rake. He continued to work after the rest of us gave up for the day.

His kindness encouraged us and stirred us to visit him and surprise him with an act of kindness on Thursday. Leslie and I brought him

brownies, a Heavenly Handmade crocheted angel, and a card thanking him for being our angel on Wednesday. He hugged us, wolfed the brownies without sitting down, and returned my plate while his roommate, John, a Marine Corps veteran, spoke candidly about the ups and downs of his Christian walk. His ministry includes playing rugby with a Marine Corps group to raise money for families of veterans in need. We encouraged him to keep on walking his journey of faith. Later, I thanked God not only for Desmond's kindness, but for the opportunity to share God's love.

Did you notice that Paul, in his letter to the Romans, echoes Jesus's teachings on love? Jesus answers a question about the "greatest commandment" in Matthew 22:37-40, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Paul lists 4 of the *Ten Commandments* in 13:9, summing them up as "Love your neighbor as yourself." They are: thou shall not commit adultery, murder, steal and covet. Then Paul does something that reminded me of John Calvin when he discusses the *Ten Commandments* in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1559. Paul says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law"--"law" meaning, we suppose, the whole of the *Ten Commandments*, but perhaps every OT law, including those in Leviticus.

Calvin says this about the 6th Commandment--“Thou shalt not kill.”“*The purport of this commandment is that since the Lord has bound the whole human race by a kind of unity, the safety of all ought to be considered as intrusted to each. In general, therefore, all violence and injustice and every kind of harm from which our neighbor’s body suffers, is prohibited. Accordingly, we are required faithfully to do what in us lies to defend the life of our neighbor, to promote whatever tends to his tranquility, to be vigilant in warding off harm, and, when danger comes, to assist in removing it.*”

In Romans 13:13, Paul lists behaviors that violate the love command. The works of darkness followers are urged to “lay aside,” with the help of the Spirit, putting on the “armor of light,” “putting on Jesus Christ,” are “reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy.” He emphasizes the last two--quarreling and jealousy-- by their position at the end of the sentence!

This also reminds me of Calvin, as he continues his discussion of “Thou shalt not kill,” which we may mistakenly believe is limited to the actual act of taking a life. Calvin says, “*this commandment, therefore, prohibits the murder of the heart, and requires a sincere desire to preserve our brother’s life. The hand, indeed, commits the murder, but the mind, under the influence of wrath and hatred, conceives it. How can you be angry with your brother, without passionately longing to do him harm?*”

What may be confusing for us about this passage in Romans is that it follows Paul urging us to live in freedom from the bondage of the law of sin and death. So, do we have to follow the OT laws-- or not?

Paul's answer: yes, we are obligated to follow the law *of love* as we follow our Savior. Our passage begins, "Owe no one anything, *except to love one another*, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." This is a segue from his earlier teaching in chapter 13 on Christ's followers being good citizens, paying taxes and honoring their debts. In 13:8, Paul returns to the subject begun in chapter 12-- how to live a Spirit-transformed, mind-renewed life, revealing Christ to our fallen world by our "genuine love" and "mutual affection" for one another (Romans 12:9-10). He sounds like Jesus, again, doesn't he, when the Lord gives us a new commandment, which really isn't new, if you consider the sum of the law and the *Ten Commandments* is "love." Jesus says in John 13:34-35, "This is my commandment--that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Friends, it is definitely our love for one another that is helping me through Irma's aftermath. Is it helping you, too? We aren't alone! Others are struggling, impatient and frustrated, too, but also feeling blessed by God--because our losses could have been so much greater! We have each other--and we have the Church. Even if the building were lost to us, we would still *BE the Church!* We are Christ's Body, empowered and united by His Spirit to minister with all our different gifts and talents. Do you need help now? Do you know of others who need help? Please let me, an elder, or a deacon know.

Have you been blessed by acts of love from a neighbor? I look forward to hearing your stories of grace.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for caring for us throughout the storms of our lives, strengthening and guiding us to endure frightening times. Thank you for your love and your Spirit that unites our congregation and the Body of Christ! Help us to love one another and reveal Christ's love to the world. Thank you for giving us this place to gather for worship and ministry in your name. Thank you for the many acts of kindness and love from neighbors during and after Hurricanes Irma and Harvey. Bless the rescue workers and volunteers who continue to help people in need. Please, Lord, help those with great losses recover and heal. May we all be moved to love you and our neighbors around the world through acts of kindness, more and more. In Christ we pray. Amen.