

Fulfilling the Law
Romans 13:8-10(11-14)
September 6, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

Consider these sayings, which as far as I know are pretty common in our culture. “You don’t get something for nothing.” “Scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.” “Tit for tat.” “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” I’m sure there’s more that I couldn’t think of. They all have pretty much the same message: things that we do for each other are transactions. There’s an imaginary ledger that we keep running in our heads, according to these sayings, where we remember things like “I loaned the next door neighbor our hedge trimmer, so he is somehow obligated to loan me a chainsaw.” Or “I picked up your kid from school three times in a row, so now you owe me three times of picking up my kid.” Or, more troubling, “I hired you and gave you a job, so now you owe me the obligation of doing whatever illegal or unethical thing I ask you to.” I know there are people who approach life like this, where they know what each person in their life owes them, and what they owe each person in their life. I myself don’t think I have the brain power or the energy to keep up with such a tally, but I know that there are people who do. And we wouldn’t have so many sayings in our collection if we didn’t subscribe to the idea.

In contrast, Paul begins our reading from Romans today with “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” You could read that to mean, don’t ever borrow anything—even a cup of sugar—from anyone, so that you won’t owe anything, then all you’ll owe them is love, as if love is something light and easy to owe. Or you could read it to mean, pay all your debts of any size back, so that you won’t owe anything but love. If all Paul meant was don’t be indebted to anyone for material things, then it would be a lot easier than what I think he’s actually saying.

Owe no one anything except to love one another. Love one another, love your neighbor as yourself. As Jesus says, this is just like the greatest commandment, to love God with all your heart and soul and strength. It’s a consistent message in Scripture, Old Testament and New. Love your neighbor. And then God tells us and shows us what “love” means in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. And that makes it clear that owing your neighbor love doesn’t mean that you owe your neighbor nothing, but rather than you owe your neighbor everything. Everything, even at great sacrifice on your part. Love one another. There’s no tally sheet or ledger that will ever be balanced when “love” is the standard.

And then Paul tells us, loving one another like this is the fulfillment of the law. He then highlights the last few of the ten commandments, reminding us that love is not just a sweet feeling and warm fuzzies, but loving one another is both attitude and action. And it’s not that loving one another ticks off every single box of the ledger of the law, so that we can say we’ve fulfilled our duty. But rather, it’s that loving our neighbor orients us to living in the spirit of the law, so that we are in alignment with the intent of the commandments and fulfill the law in that way.

I’ve been collecting stories that I see online and in various places. When I went to look at my collection, a whole bunch of them fell into the “love your neighbor” category. I thought

you, too, might need a little pick-me-up of good news stories, gospel stories in a way, stories that show and tell us how to love one another, in attitude and action.

So first, a couple of funny ones. Elementary aged children were asked what love is. Here are some answers: Elaine, age 5, says that love is when Mommy gives Daddy the best piece of chicken. Chrissy, age 6, also has a food theme. She says that love is when you give someone most of your French fries and don't take any off their plate. And Rebecca, age 8, has a little more mature response: 'When my grandmother got arthritis , she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore.. So my grandfather does it for her all the time , even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.' Love one another.

And one from the animal world: If a hermit crab finds a bigger shell, it will explore it and see if it can fit. If the shell is too big, it will wait by the shell for up to 8 hours as other crabs come along and try it out. As they realize it is too big for them as well, they line up next to the shell and form a line from biggest crab to smallest. They wait for the crab that is the perfect fit, and then they all exchange shells in sequence so everyone gets a new, larger home. Love your neighbor.

And finally, this one, from just last week, caught my eye because of our ongoing prayers with David's friend Cindy, in the little village in Alaska, one of many that can only be reached by plane. In another such village in Alaska, only reachable by plane, population 70 people, there was a girl who needed to be flown to the nearest hospital, 280 miles away in Anchorage. A pilot flew in at night to pick her up, but the runway lights were not functioning. As you might imagine, there are no other lighted landmarks in a tiny, tribal village, so there were no streetlights or anything else to guide the pilot to a safe landing. A person in the village heard the plane arriving late at night, knew that a nighttime arrival meant that something was wrong, looked toward the airport and didn't see the runway lights. So she called the whole village, and within minutes, 32 vehicles had arrived at the air strip, each vehicle's headlights pointed toward the runway, so the plane could land and then take off safely.

Love your neighbor. Love one another. It's all you owe, but it's everything.