

In Debt to Love

Romans 13:8 -10

September 6, 2020

At the United Methodist ordination service, the bishop takes a time of examination to ask those candidates for ordination 20 questions, known as Historic Examination for Admission into Full Connection. To share some, "Have you faith in Christ?" "Are you going on to perfection?" "Are you earnestly striving after it?" "Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God and His work?" "Will you preach and maintain them?" They sound very solemn and serious, don't they.

Hear one more question: "Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?" It seems so inappropriate for such a hallowed occasion. Doesn't it? "Are you in debt so much as to embarrass you in your work?" Of course, every candidate for ordination are in debt. Who wouldn't be after a long education in seminary? But all the candidates look the bishop straight in the eye and say, "No" – even though we all know we are in debt. Debt is a fact of life for most ministers.

For most Americans, too. Not long ago, some economist figured that the average American adult carries four credit cards and owes his or her creditors 63% of his or her net worth. "Are you in debt so much as to embarrass you in your work?" "Sure I am, bishop!" I should have replied. "And so are you! We're both in debt forever!"

St. Paul agrees - although the debt to which he refers in our text has nothing to do with money. Let me read what he wrote once again. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." The Living Bible paraphrase him with powerful accuracy here: "Pay all your debts except the debt of love for others - never finish paying that!"

In other words, St. Paul encouraged those Roman Christians of the first century and us American Christians of the twentieth century to stay in debt forever, as long as our indebtedness is that of love.

1

Yes, we are to stay in debt to love God who loves us unconditionally and eternally.

We owe God so much. God's love is revealed in the work of his creation. Out of love, God has created and is still creating all living beings in this universe. You are here and I am here. We are here thanks to God who has breathed into us the breath of life.

Our lives are surrounded by God's gracious love always. We sing, therefore, Doxology, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow" every Sunday morning. All blessings flow from God, our Creator, indeed. What blessings are you enjoying lately? Your family, friends, neighbors? Your work? Your church? Your daily meal? Your resting and relaxation? Your retirement? We believe God, the Provider and the Sustainer is the One working in our midst, because God loves us and cares about us. Surely our cup overflows.

These days, I am grateful and blessed that we do read a chapter of the Bible together as God's people at Fairfield Grace. By reading it with help of the Holy Spirit, we encounter God speaking softly and clearly every morning. What a wonderful blessing it is.

The greatest blessing God has given us, I think, is God's sending Jesus Christ to us and rescuing us from the bondage of sins and death and leading us to life of freedom. God's amazing love has come to us through Jesus Christ and revealed to us through his earthly life and ministry and in his death on the cross and his resurrection out of the tomb. We are the people who have seen the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Being overwhelmed and touched by God's amazing love through Christ, we have been transformed by God's grace to live as God's people filled with thanksgiving and joy. Yes, we are in debt to love God now and forever.

A question arises. How? How does one love God forever? How do you love God whom you cannot see, touch and hold?

By keeping God's commandments, that's how. "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments," says John (1 John 5:3) - and Paul agrees when he says, "Therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." (Romans 13:10) If we honestly want to pay our debt of love to God, we love to obey God in all possible ways.

You know Ten Commandments. We consider it the law of God to obey. Yes, we will have no other gods before God because we love God. We will keep the Sabbath holy, not because we are afraid of being punished, but because we love God who took rest after the work of creation.

We will honor our parents because we love God who gives us our parents. We will not murder because we love God who honors all living beings. We will not commit adultery, not because we are worried about our reputations in the community, but because we love God who honors husband and wife in covenant. We will not steal, not because we are afraid of getting caught, but because we love God who provides all things we need. We will not bear false witness against our neighbor, because we love God who gives us neighbor to live with. We will not covet because such behavior is unworthy of those who are children of a loving Father. Yes, our obedience to God's commandments becomes part of our eternal debt of love to God.

Thus, Augustine said, "Love God, and do as you please!" because he realized that when we truly love God, we want to do only those things which please God.

2

We Christians are to stay in debt to love others forever, as well.

Jesus says, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:30-31) God we adore and love dearly expects us to love our neighbor, period.

Paul reminds us this morning of the greatest commandment the Lord has given us. "Owe no one anything," says Paul, "except to love one another." Ah, but that is a tall order. "love one another forever!"

It is not an easy thing to do because "one another" means Jews and Greeks, circumcised and uncircumcised, blacks, whites, browns, and yellows, Baptist,

Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses. "One another" means democrats and republicans, heterosexual and homosexual, Hindus, Moslems, Jews and Buddhists.

John said it also "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother and sister, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother and sister whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:20-21).

Jesus said it, too: "By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). That's tough. That's asking a lot! You might say, "Lord, I have tried loving one another. It won't work in this world. It is not possible, Lord. How can I love those people who have different faith and different culture and different looks and different language? It is not for me, Lord."

Yes, it is for you and me and all of us, as long as we live this life as Christians.

A question.

How? How can we do love one another forever?

Hear Ephesians 5:1-2, which reads, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Hear Ephesians 4:32, which offers us more practical way to love. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." How to love one another? One answer to this question is, the Bible says, "be kind and compassionate, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave us."

Leo Tolstoy was walking one day through the streets of Leningrad at the height of the great famine which swept through Russia in his day. He passed a beggar on the street corner. Stretching out his hands, with blue lips and sunken eyes, the beggar asked for money. Tolstoy put his hands into his pockets and could not find even a penny. He took the beggar's hands in both of his and said, "Do not be angry with me, brother. I have no money with me." The beggar's face lighted up, and he lifted his eyes with a smile: "But you called me brother! Thank you for such a gift." Tolstoy hurried home for some money, but when he returned a short time later,

the beggar was dead. On his cold face the smile still lingered. His body was dead, but Tolstoy's kindness had made his heart warm.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Leo Tolstoy did it. He was a Christian forever in debt to love. He learned to pay on that debt by loving others like Jesus Christ did. As he did, so can we.

Let me close.

Ubuntu is an African proverb, meaning "I am because you are." It embraces the idea that humans cannot exist in isolation. We depend on connection, community, and caring — simply, we cannot be without each other. How true it is. God challenges us to take one more step. "Love one another as I have loved you. Serve others as I have served you. Accept others as I have accepted you."

Have you noticed that we have been praying the same prayer of Thanksgiving every time after communion?

"Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit to give ourselves for others in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

That is a perfect morning prayer every day. "Grant that we may go into the world today in the strength of your Spirit to give ourselves for others in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord."

In the name of God the Creator, Christ the Savior and the Holy Spirit the Counselor. Amen. Amen.