

9-10-17 Sermon: “The Rule of Love” – Romans 13:8-14

I am always grateful for a rule of thumb to make things less complicated.

Take spelling, for instance. The English language is a peculiar one when it comes to the order of letters, particularly vowels. And I’m sure there are good reasons buried deep in grammar books for why “i” comes first in one word, and “e” in another. But I’m happy to stick with the little rhyme I learned in grade school, “I before e, except after c, or when it sounds like ‘a’, as in neighbor or weigh.”

Or taxes. Some of you – and I admire you for it – know the ins and outs of tax law. When it’s this percentage, when it’s that one; why this qualifies as an exemption but that doesn’t, etc. But I am very happy to just enter the numbers my computer program asks for and let it calculate who owes what to whom.

It’s not that I don’t care about grammar or taxes – I do! But there’s only so much time in the day, and only so much space in my brain. There’s something to be said for a rule that makes things simple.

I think that’s what Paul is up to in this morning’s reading from Romans. Many of the rabbis and Jewish leaders in Paul’s time were in the practice of taking the Torah, the Law of God – all 613 commandments that God gives in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – and interpreting it with examples and exceptions and applications. For example, the Law says to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. And so, the rabbis began to write and teach which actions one could and could not perform on the Sabbath.

And Paul, too, wants to teach the commands of God and of Jesus Christ in a way that would be tangible and concrete for Christ’s followers. But Paul takes the opposite approach. Instead of expanding the Law to account for any given circumstance, Paul brings it in and points to a “least common denominator,” a rule that ties all the commandments together: Love your neighbor as yourself. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor,” Paul says, “therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law.” It’s a Biblical Hippocratic oath, of sorts. The first rule is love. And love, at its minimum, means doing no harm to our neighbors.

This ‘Rule of Love’ that Paul prescribes for the Roman Christians is nothing new; it’s the same answer that Jesus offered when he was challenged by the Pharisees. We heard David read it in Leviticus; it’s part the Law itself! It is so simple, and yet so essential. This Rule of Love is like a holy plumb line against which we can measure all our actions. “Thou shalt look out for the well-being of thy neighbor. Thou shalt not do thy neighbor harm.”

It goes without saying – but I’ll say it anyway – that “Love your neighbor” is no Valentine’s Day commandment. This Rule of Love is not the ‘Rule of Fuzzy Feelings’, or even the ‘Rule of Finding Someone Halfway Tolerable’. Some of you may remember several months ago, in another sermon about love, when I shared the wise words of my friend Dr. John Trotti. Dr. Trotti says, “I am grateful that Jesus calls us to *love* one another, rather than to *like* one another. There are some people that I simply cannot bring myself to like. But with the grace of God, I can treat even those people that I do not *like* with love.”

Loving our neighbors as ourselves has little to nothing to do with whether or not we think our neighbors would be fun to have around at a dinner party. That’s not to diminish the friendship and affection we can feel for one another, but it is to say that love runs a whole lot deeper than that. That love has more to do with actions than with feelings. To love our neighbors as ourselves means to actively concern ourselves with the things that concern our neighbors, and

to work for the well-being of our neighbors – as if our own lives and well-being were in the balance.

But Paul has more to say to the Roman Christians than just “love your neighbors.” Paul writes to them, “Love your neighbors, *especially* right now.”

Now, surely the people to whom Paul was writing were as familiar with this the teaching – this central message of Jesus Christ – as we are today. Surely Paul doesn’t need to remind them – to remind *us* – that the Christian life is based on the practice of love.

But he still does. Because Paul is convinced that this rule is both timeless and yet somehow also *urgent*, a rule that needs to be repeated in this time and place. “Love your neighbor *now*,” Paul says, “Because you know what time it is; it’s time to wake up! Love your neighbor *now*, because salvation is closer at hand that it was before. Love your neighbor *now*, for the dawn is breaking and the day is near. Love *now*, because now is somehow more important than ever.”

Paul recognized that something new was happening, in the Church and in the world. In his earliest letters, it’s clear that Paul believed Christ would return any day now, that ‘the end is near’, as the street preachers say. But by the time he wrote Romans, the last letter of his career, was that still how he felt? Or was it some different day that Paul sensed was dawning? The day, perhaps, of the Church?

The fact of the matter is that we don’t know. We don’t know what it was that made Paul believe he was writing at a *kairos* moment, a turning point, a moment we’ve all be waiting for. But I think, somewhere in our gut, we understand that feeling of being right on the precipice of history, right on the brink of something new. Perhaps it’s because we, too, have this instinctive sense that a new day is dawning in our time. We don’t necessarily know what this new day looks like. We are still in that dark, indistinct time between dawn and daybreak. But I don’t think I’m the only one who has this feeling. I think you all might be sensing it too – that something important is upon us, and that it’s time for us to wake up and prepare ourselves to meet a new day.

As we do, Paul reminds us, it is especially urgent – now more than ever – that we love our neighbors as ourselves. For something...something is coming. And Jesus has taught us to be disciples – to *love* – for just such a time as this.

Perhaps this Rule of Love is always an urgent commandment when a new day is dawning. My mind keeps wandering back to Leviticus, to the very first place in the Scriptures where we hear this command to love our neighbors as ourselves. The Hebrew people have just been delivered from the bonds of slavery, are still shaking the Egyptian dust off their sandals, when God speaks to them and says, “First, this. This you must do. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And as I have wrestled with these Scriptures this week, I’ve emerged convinced that it’s no accident that the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” occurs in the same chapter, in the same list of laws, as the commandment that reads, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien, but the alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself. For *you* were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

If ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ is a general commandment, almost a summary, this commandment about how to treat the foreigners in our midst is pointed and explicit. It’s an urgent, political, concrete, in-the-world application of this Rule of Love. And it comes with an equally pointed reminder.

A new day *was* dawning for the Hebrew people. To their utter amazement, their God of hope had heard their cry and delivered them from Egypt when they thought no hope was left. And as if that were not enough, this God claims them, claims *us*, as God's own people, and teaches them his Way, his Rule: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"But before you get too comfortable," God continues, "Let me also remind you that you shall love the *alien* in your midst as yourself. You shall not oppress them, and you shall consider them as citizens among you. For remember, just a few miles back in Egypt, *you* were the aliens in a strange land. And you were not treated as citizens, with love, but as slaves, as free labor, as less-than-human. So when I say 'love your neighbor', I mean love the person with whom you are closest, and love that person who is most foreign, most different from you. And love everyone in between. This is what it means to be my people. This is what it looks like to worship a God of love."

Friends, a new day is upon us. As a church, as a nation, a world. I confess, I don't know what exactly this day looks like. Perhaps some of you have a clearer view than I do. But I do know this. We are called to wake up and get ready, because God has an important role for us to play. And according to the Scriptures, it has everything to do with love.