

Owe No One Anything But Love

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

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Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The 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, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off^[a] the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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Last week, we heard from Paul’s letter to the early church at Rome: Love one another. Let love be genuine. Paul, as a writer, was wordy - so there was more to last week’s passage. And then we get to this week’s word to the Romans, skipping over just a few slightly tricky verses, and here’s Paul again: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Taking what Paul and Jesus say are the very most important things, I could say, Love one another, and then stop talking and sit down. But let's put a few more details on that.

First, we need to know the type of love Paul was preaching. There's love that is an emotion, and love that is a verb. Paul's talking about love as a verb. This isn't love that just happens by default, this isn't love we stumble into, this is love we choose and love we foster through our actions.

There's a bunch of kinds of love in ancient Greek - there's romantic love, family love, etc. Paul is preaching *Agape* love -

The translation is straightforward, actually: *agape* is the kind of love that exhibits good will and benevolence toward others.

Agape love is other-focused and self-giving. *Agape* love is the same kind of love Jesus taught in the parable of the good Samaritan: who is our neighbor? Everyone. How shall we treat them? With *agape* love.

Agape love seeks the wellbeing of all people. God's *agape* love is life-giving and when we know that gift, we are called to practice the same kind of *agape*. "Because God lives in us, we embody God's love for the world....[we belong to God.]...[Today,] God's love is incarnate in us."¹

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¹ Judith Jones, Working Preacher Commentary on 1 John 4:7-21

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

This is not Paul setting aside the Torah - the Jewish law. Even though Paul focused a lot of time on Gentile converts to the way of Jesus, he was Jewish. And as a professor of Jewish studies, Jon Levenson, wrote, “It is not a question of law or love, but law conceived in love, love expressed in law.”²

Now, there’s more to the love that Paul’s preaching.

Agape love is mutual - not hierarchical. Paul and the church at Rome lived in the midst of a patron-client, hierarchical culture. Paul’s *agape* love is egalitarian.³

Agape love is proactive. Love goes beyond obligation. If you’re loving your neighbor, Paul doesn’t want you to wait until your neighbor wanders by to ask for a cup of sugar. Ronald Allen says *agape* love is “impatient to meet the needs of the neighbor.”⁴

Agape love, in Paul’s world, is also urgent. Do you know what time it is?? Wake up! The day is near!

Paul thinks that Jesus is coming back, like, Tuesday. So whatever people are going to do as followers of the Way, they have to do right now. It’s urgent! Get out there! Jesus is coming, look busy!

And we’ve lived 2000 years, so far, without Jesus coming back. You could say, what’s the rush, buddy?

² Allen and Williamson, *Preaching the Letters without Dismissing the Law*, page 85

³ Yes, we can argue about whether Paul is, overall, egalitarian.

⁴ Allen and Williamson

Maybe you'd like to take a minute when no one is watching for some licentiousness. (What a word.) Maybe you'd like to live according to norms of Roman society rather than the norms of *agape* love. This part, by the way, is about how we interact with our neighbors. Are we kind or are we quarreling, are we generous or are we jealous? What's the impact of our behavior on other people? Does it hurt or help? The way we live impacts not just our own humanity, not just our circle, it impacts our neighbors. When we live according to *agape* love - especially when our loving offers a contrast to an unloving world - it matters.

We lack something crucial without the urgency of love. We have a responsibility to be proactive, to be out there in the world practicing *agape* love. Because every moment a neighbor needs love, it should feel urgent to us.

And community is the final point I want to make about Paul's *agape* love. Paul is not writing to an individual here. *Dear Kelly, please be kind to Stan. I know y'all got some stuff to work out.*

Paul is writing to a community. A group of faithful people. A congregation. About how they should practice *agape* love in the world, communally. Scholars of Romans think this letter goes back and forth between the way the congregation should operate internally, among one another, and how the community should love the world. This is one of the externally focused sections. How is the world going to experience this community? How is the world going to be impacted by this Christian congregation? Paul tells the Romans: put on the armor of light, put on Christ and as a community, go into the world to love your neighbors.

Love is not insular. Agape love is outward facing. Love is not passive. Love blesses its neighbors.

Love makes the world better.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.

Love is a verb.

Love is self-giving.

Love is God's name.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor.

Love is mutual.

Love is outward facing.

Love is proactive.

Love goes beyond obligation.

Love is a bright star in the sky.

Love is communal.

Love is urgent.

Love blesses neighbors.

Love is the word.

Amen.