

“Love is the Fulfilling of the Law”

Romans 13: 8-14

Have you ever had a week that seemed to have a running theme, where the universe seemed to be talking in one voice and it was the same message each time, where incident after incident seemed to reinforce one particular ideal? Well, that was this week for me when it came to this Scripture and sermon message. Every day, this past week, I was constantly reminded how the very essence of our discipleship, of our calling is a call, is a way of love.

The funny thing about it is I picked this Scripture reading months ago and I remember saying to myself as I was picking it, “Love, that’s always a good topic to talk about in church.” And as I sat down on Monday to do some sermon preparation, I thought, “Love, that’s an easy sermon to write.” Little did I know how true those words would be.

In this scripture text today, Paul is talking with the Christians who are a part of the church in Rome and they are struggling. They are struggling with what it means to live out their calling faithfully. They want to know exactly how to live their lives as Christians. They want to know exactly what they have to do to be good disciples. They want to know where the checklist is that shows them what they have to do to be disciples of Christ.

Paul's answer to their questions is pretty quick and simple: Follow the law given to you by God and follow the example given to you by Jesus Christ. I'm pretty sure that as these Christians in Rome were reading this letter, they were probably thinking to themselves, "Done. We can do that. The law is pretty straight forward. We won't kill. We won't steal. We won't lie. We can do these. Done. If that's all it takes, this being a disciple is pretty easy."

That was until they read Paul's next line in the letter addressed to them! Paul goes on to say, "Sure following the law is easy, but if you only follow the law, you miss out on the heart of the law. And the heart of the law is love: Love of God and love of neighbor. He continues his letter to the Romans by saying, "We can all do the love of God thing. That's a given, but we get tripped up when it comes to love of neighbor. We either pick and choose who our neighbors are, especially if we like them or we simply say we love everyone in a theoretical and universal sense of the word love." Paul says the problem with this way of thinking is that we miss the true nature of the love that we are called to share as disciples. When we pick and choose our neighbors or when we say we love everyone, we are purposefully avoiding the issue because the truth of the matter is that we don't want to really struggle with the question of who our neighbor really is. We don't actually want to come in contact with our neighbors whether we like them or not. We don't actually want to build real relationships with our neighbors because it

will complicate life too much. We just want our checklist with what we have to do to be good disciples, no more, no less and then when the check list completed, we can know that we can avoid the people we don't like or we can simply walk by them on the street without acknowledging them as our neighbors without feeling any sense of guilt or without feeling any sense of responsibility. But the danger in all this way of thinking is that the love we proclaim and profess becomes theoretical and not actual.

The good news that Paul shares in this letter is that that the heart of the law, real love, forces us to remove our blinders and to really open our eyes to our neighbors in our midst, in our everyday lives. The good news is that when God gave the 10 commandments to the Israelites and when Jesus summed up the 10 commandments for the rich young man, both were not talking or speaking in theories. They were talking about practicing and living out a real love through our actions, through our words, and through our ministries. They were talking about showing a real love for real people who we will meet in our everyday lives, a love that goes beyond a simple emotion connection that we can make or break off at anytime because it is convenient for us to a true and real love that fills us with a much stronger sense of obligation that "locks us into active concern for others."

Paul says that it is this real love that we are called to share as disciples, a love that, yes maybe unconditional but it also carries a sense of obligation, a sense

of responsibility to and for each other because the good news is that we know what it truly means to be loved. We know this because God first loved us and showed an active concern for us. We know this because “God loves us not because the way God feels for us but because of what God has done for us: God gave God’s only Son for us.”

And that is the love that we are called to share. That is the love that we are called to live out in our lives as disciples. That is the love that is good news for all of God’s children.

And that has been the message of love that has been reflected to me all week, incident after incident, reinforcing our calling as people of welcome, as people of grace, and as people of love.

It all started on Monday as we were getting ready for our community dinner. I was already overwhelmed with how quickly and how easily this dinner had come together. The main part of the meal had been donated either by Kroger’s or God’s Pantry. And I had received word that the community garden would be donating a few things along with the Woodford County Detention Center. The meal had literally come together bit by bit through the efforts and generosity of our community.

I knew all these bits and pieces were coming for the dinner but I was still overwhelmed by the outpouring that we received. The community garden had sent

over two big bags of snap beans, 3 or 4 bags of cherry tomatoes, a bag of peppers, and a bag of squash. And when I walked into the kitchen, I discovered 6 big watermelons and two crates of tomatoes, all donated from the detention center's garden!

There was such an outpouring of love from our community for this new ministry, but these are the visible signs of that love for neighbor that Paul was talking about in our Scripture. It was what happened around the tables that night that really reinforced this idea of real love and active concern for one another for me. Neighbors sat beside neighbor. Strangers sat beside strangers. A small part of the community of Midway were sitting around the table, eating together, fellowshiping with each, and building relationships with one another, no labels, no reserved sitting, no have's and have not's. Just a community of people gathered around the table, sharing in the blessings of God's abundance. People getting to know one another as neighbors, as real people, rather than people they may just pass on the street. Around the table that night, the story of love, the story of the Gospel came to life, all because people were breaking bread with one another as neighbors, as people we meet in our everyday lives, seeing each other as created in the image of God.

We heard so many comments that ranged from "You don't know how good it was to sit down to dinner with other people. It's so hard to cook for just one. And

it gets lonely, sitting at the table, with just the TV for company” to “Thanks so much for doing this. We really needed this extra bit of help. Our Social Security check won’t come until the first of the month which is still a few days away and we are running low on funds. This meal really helped stretch our dollar” to “I sat with people that I didn’t even know where part of our community” to “I can’t wait until next month. I know just the person who needs and would benefit from this great opportunity.

Real love in practice, not just in theory!

And the message didn’t stop there. It continued on Wednesday night when worlds collided, when seemingly separate communities came together to celebrate their partnership, when the Bluegrass Bicycling Club came together with our Green Chalice Team and with the Green Space team of the Midway Renaissance to celebrate the visible sign of love of neighbor.

And I couldn’t help thinking, as I was watching the ribbon cutting for the new bike racks, how did this crazy partnership come about? How was it possible that 3 separate groups, 3 groups of people that probably won’t have ever gotten connected because of different interests, could come together in partnership and celebrate this wonderful new beginning?

The answer surprisingly is a need for bathrooms! The Bluegrass Cycling Club had been meeting up at Northside to begin their rides but it was hard for

people to gather there, especially if they were coming straight from work for the simple fact, there was no access to bathrooms.

So in a separate conversation with a few of our members and one of the riders, the topic of this need for space came up and Midway Christian Church was offered! Great idea and for months now, on Wednesday nights, bike riders have gathered at Midway Christian Church to prepare for their ride.

And through this beginning, another conversation started, a conversation about how we could be more welcoming for the bike riders in community. Long story, short, through the partnership of the Bluegrass Bicycling Club, the Green Chalice, and the Green Space committee, four new bike racks were purchased and placed around town, once again, visible signs of this love for neighbor that Paul was talking about in our Scripture today.

And once again, it was what happened around those bike racks on Wednesday night, that reinforced this idea of love and active concern for one another for me as a person who is called to share the good news.

There were small connections created that night. There were relationships created that night. And once again, there was some great conversations started that night. I heard comments that ranged from “Thanks so much for your hospitality on Wednesday nights. It makes life so much easier. This way, I have time to stay active and help keep my health in check” to “Maybe there are some other ways we

can work together to do some much needed help in our communities to “Thanks so much for your church doing this. I didn’t realize that a church could be so welcoming without expecting something else in return”.

Real love in practice, not just in theory.

The good news is that it has not just been this week that this message has been laid up on my heart or upon our hearts as Midway Christian church. This is the message of love and active concern that we are called to share at all times as disciples of Christ. This is the message of responsibility to an for each other that we are called to live out through our lives, through our actions and through our deeds as people of faith. This is the message of real love that we are called to practice as children of God for real people that we met in our everyday lives. This is the message we are called to proclaim and profess because we worship and celebrate a God who gave us God’s only Son as a visible sign, a sign available to all, a sign that shows us always that God loves us and has taken an active concern for us and for all of God’s creation.

May we always live out this real love in practice and not just in theory. Amen.