

## 13<sup>th</sup> Day after Pentecost-Year A

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

Good morning. It's great to see all of you here today since today is Rally Sunday which is simply the Sunday that marks the beginning of new programs of ministry for everyone in our church.

'Love your neighbor as yourself' is the beginning of how we evaluate our lives as Christians. Thing is, good people, many who claim to be Christians, have not lived out these words and hurt others. My goal today is to give you a new beginning in realizing God's love for you and how three statements can shape your behavior to love everyone, especially those people who are hard to love.

When my wife, Michelle, and I were dating, we were both in graduate school; me at Luther Seminary and she was at the University of Minnesota. We began dating in late November and after the holidays, I planned on being at her parent's New Year's Day brunch so I could meet many of her relatives.

When I arrived, I was overwhelmed by all the people. More than a few people asked me this question, "What made you want to become a pastor?" All of them have a Roman Catholic background and have a deep respect for clergy so they had a few questions about the Lutheran tradition. Michelle's uncle asked, "What do you like about being Lutheran?" I said, "Eating steaks on Friday during Lent" which brought on some laughter.

Back in my seminary dorm room that evening, Michelle and I were talking on the phone. I asked her how she thought the day went. "Well, we were laughing when you left." Great and I thought 'did I have something in my teeth'? Was my zipper down and no one told me? She said, "We were laughing because my aunt Ceil, who swears all the time, she didn't say one swear word when you were here. We thought it was funny in that having a future pastor in the room led her to change her behavior." We now have a joke in that family, if you ever want Ceil to not swear, simply put a pastor or a child in the room and all will be fine.

How true it is that our behavior reflects what we truly believe is important, right, and appropriate. For Ceil, not swearing in front of a pastor, or a future pastor, was the right thing to do. Such sentiments are magnified when we talk about love.

Love is something all of us know we should do but can we love everybody? For some, you know of a child or teen whose been **bullied** at school...how do you model love towards a bully? You may know of a person at **work** who just does enough to get by or you have a boss who is condescending...can you love them? That **relative or friend whose lifestyle** leaves you shaking your head in disgust...can you love them? These are just a few of many examples of when it is hard to love others. At times, walking on water would seem like the easier thing to do compared to showing love in our behavior.

God must have known we would struggle with this because Jesus addressed it throughout his ministry and the Apostle Paul's words today are so convicting that lives will be changed for the better if we live them out.

In the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew, there is a subtle confrontation between one of the religious leaders and Jesus. Matthew writes: One of them, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."

Before the leader, or anyone listening, could raise their hand to ask a question, Jesus then said, “And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’. The second goes with the first one and both are equal in importance: Love God. Love Your Neighbor.

This is fascinating because Jesus was man from an obscure town born to a lowly couple. He had no influence. He lived in what many would call the ‘armpit of the Roman Empire’, no one really cared, no one really paid attention except the prostitutes, tax collectors and other outcasts of society. He could have said any one of a hundred powerful statements but God gave him this message for the world: love one another.

It’s so simple yet so remarkable based on our own experience because in your life, there are two categories of people who have influenced you the most. Their impact wasn’t in what they believed, it wasn’t because they were necessarily religious people. The two categories of people are those who’ve **hurt you deeply** and those who’ve **loved you profoundly**.

Many of us in this room, many in our culture have been hurt deeply by people who said the right things, who attended church nearly every Sunday, who believed all the right things, who from the outside looked like fine people. But behind the scenes, their behavior devastated you, destroyed your outlook on what it means to ‘go to church’ and it had a lasting painful impact on you.

At times, my wife’s aunt Ceil has trouble going to mass. Why? No, it’s not because of her affinity for poor language. It’s because of why certain men are in prison, specifically Roman Catholic priests, who abused children. From the outside looking in they appeared to many as fine people, those others can trust, who were an example of the Christian life! But their behavior towards innocent children is devastating.

On the flip side, you are successful, you were provided skills that helped you achieve great goals, you were taught how to care for others. All of this was done by people who may have had simple beliefs but they loved you. You can probably name one person who likely didn’t go to church too often and didn’t know every book of the Bible, but they loved you. You live as a husband, wife, parent, friend based on the influence of those people. It could have been a parent, a teacher, a pastor, a coach, a friend.

This is why the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, “The commandments are summed up in this way: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’. (Romans 13:8) Then he said, “**And do this understanding the present time.**” **Don’t wait.** Don’t wait for the person to apologize for their behavior. Don’t wait by avoiding the person who hurt you. Don’t wait to let your anger subside. Love now. At times it’ll be hard, it may cost you something, you may think by showing love is way of brushing everything aside as though it never happened. That’s not it. Love brings about healing, forgiveness and growth to a situation that was painful and dark.

It all comes down to this one question: **What does love require of me?** In this situation, in this relationship...what does love require of me? You can be one of two people in the lives of another person: you can either hurt them deeply or love them profoundly.

**What does love require of me? God** answered that question when you looked at a sinful world by sending his Son in order to bring the world back to God.

**Jesus** answered that question by dying on a cross for your sins and the sins of the world in order that you and all may have forgiveness and eternal life.

**Paul** answered that question when he traveled all over the ancient world as the greatest ambassador of spreading Christ’s message. He endured beatings, prison, shipwrecks, sickness...because he needed to share the message of Jesus Christ.

“What does love require of me?” How do we live this out...loving your neighbor as yourself?

These two statements give us a practical, seemingly easy way to do this: **Don't do anything that will hurt someone else. Don't be mastered by anything.**

1) **What does love require of you? Don't do anything that will hurt someone else.** This is about your relationships in that you decide regardless of how you view the world, I will not do or say anything to hurt someone. Every person you interact is someone God loves as much as He loves you. Even those who hurt you the most are the same people Jesus died for on the cross. What love requires of you is to decide to have a filter for your words and actions will not tempt, abuse or hurt another person.

2) **What does love require of you? Don't be mastered by anything.** Whenever you are mastered by something, it'll keep you from loving someone. No one should have to compete with alcohol, anger, your work schedule, your quest for having more stuff. Love requires that you get rid of anything that gets in the way of God being the master of your life. When God is your master, you can love others.

Finally, some of you are thinking of other people. “I am so glad my husband is here to hear this.” Or, “I'm going to call my kid in college and have them listen to this a couple times.” Isn't that the perspective that when we hear ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ as being for someone else, that more pain is caused?

What would happen if everyone took these words seriously? Everything would change for the better: relationships would be strengthened, communities and our nation wouldn't be so divided, the church would have greater influence.

For you, for us today, let's make these words a reality. Let's begin by saying: I'm breaking my bad habits and take better care of me. I'm going to confront the people that I haven't love. I'm not going to be silent but make things better with the person that hurt me. I'm not going to be mastered by anything be it work, my temper, whatever it may be.

You can hurt people deeply or love people profoundly. 2,000 years ago someone asked Jesus while he stood on earth, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment? Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.” And the Apostle Paul said, “Do it now. Love now.” When love is seen, it is irresistible. Amen.