

Sermon for 6th September 2026, Year A, Pentecost 15

Preached at St John's Baillieston

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

Sermon

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Love is the identifying marker of Christian faith – it should define our attitudes, our behaviours, and our norms. When people meet us, they should see something different about us. We’re not mean to people we don’t like. We’re not selfish. We don’t gossip. We share what we have with others, especially our time, and we even share kindly with those who hate us.

That’s how it should be at any rate. And it is actually the reason I’m a Christian today. When I was a 20 year old atheist at university, I started to get into debates with Christians about their faith, and I was amazed at how kind the Christians were to me, even as I was insulting their intelligence and their Jesus. It was the first time I ever realised that it might be wise, or even possible, to love others rather than just look out for myself.

But what does it mean to ‘love others’? The law tells us not to kill people, or steal from them, and that we must pay our taxes. What more does love ask of us, that the law cannot? It surely can’t force us to have feelings for people? I mean, either we like someone, or we don’t.

This ‘love’ that Paul is talking about has little to do with emotion. His examples of love are not about feelings but behaviour. No one can have fond, endearing feelings towards their ‘enemies’, but we can and should love them, just as we should also love those parts of ourselves that we dislike and which cause us distress.

The mystics say that love has 'two feet' – love of God and love of neighbour. There is no order to this, they are both the same thing, because God appears as our neighbour.

So, what is love? Love is a change in the heart from thinking about one's own needs, to thinking about others' needs. This invariably fulfils the spirit & intention of the law more completely than following all the rules.

This is not to say that laws are irrelevant – every society and community needs structure. However, there are some things that law cannot achieve, and some things that rules simply make worse. Laws and rules must always serve love, not the other way around.

Now, what does it mean, to love, in practice? Paul says love does no harm to a neighbour. And who is our neighbour? Well, Jesus has already answered that one in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Our neighbour is anyone with whom we interact.

Love does not mean becoming a doormat for someone else's selfishness, but it does mean giving equal weight to the needs of our neighbour, even those who don't deserve it – the Good Samaritan and many other parables are clear examples of what that means in practice.

It should of course be part of our Christian spirituality to always be pondering what it means to love others as God loves us. We should always be thinking, 'how can I love this person, in this moment'.

Love may mean paying attention to their body language, being sensitive to how they are feeling. It may mean listening patiently to their stories, even when you've heard them before, or would much rather be telling one of your own. It will certainly mean not complaining about them behind their backs or criticising them to your friends and allies – our gospel reading makes that very clear. It is

impossible to love someone in any sense of the word if you are judging them in your heart as somehow unworthy of that love.

So, love means going out of our way to meet someone else's needs, especially when we would rather cross by on the other side.

And this does apply to loving ourselves as well. Paul may not have had much of a problem with his own self-esteem, but for many of us today, one often-forgotten neighbour we need to truly listen to, love and care for, is actually the traumatised and angry and broken parts of our own souls. We must learn to love the unlovable parts of ourselves, because they too are our neighbour, and God is always in our neighbour.

This doesn't mean we can be selfish, ignore others, do what suits us, and then justify it by calling it self-care. It means both-and, not either-or. We love others, even our enemies, and we love ourselves, even the enemies in our own mind. They are the same. We act kindly and sensitively towards both.

So there only remains the question, how are we to do this? We are called to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. This is the defining characteristic of being Christian. Presumably, we all want to be or become this sort of person. Presumably, becoming like Jesus and the saints is attractive to us in some way. We long for it, have perhaps spent our lives longing for it. Otherwise, why would we come to church? Church is a school of love. Worship is an act of humble love. Pretty as our building is, it doesn't have much other use.

But many of us will find trying to become a loving person mentally exhausting. Eventually we may just throw up our hands and give in to despair. We'll probably still come to church, but maybe it becomes more for the company, and the familiar hymns, and not so much for inner transformation.

Even Paul fought with himself; in chapter 7 of this letter he says, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... wretched man that I am!".

But he has an answer for himself and us in chapter 8: “The *Spirit* helps us in our weakness,” he says, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words”. It is the Holy Spirit within us that gives us the strength to love others when we are too tired to bother. In fact, the Spirit within us makes it easier to love others than to turn away, because turning away pricks our conscience.

So, we must connect with the Holy Spirit within us. We really must spend time, every day, quietly, with nothing on our minds but God’s love. For many of us the Holy Spirit may be a tiny flickering candle in the depths of our darkness, but if we reach out to the Holy Spirit in prayer and meditation, we will discover that it is, remains, and has always been a supernova of light and love.

We are called by God to love, and we do long to love, and that is why we’re here, to learn to be a people of love, to stir up and encourage one another to love. We must never give up, not even when we’re 90 years old, but we must pray for the strength to love, and meditate on what love looks like in all the different aspects of our lives. And if we cannot even pray, then we must simply stop doing all the busy things that *aren’t* prayer, until we find the peace and silence that is always within us, and prayer rises up naturally in our hearts – because the Holy Spirit within us is always praying.

“You know what time it is,” says Paul, “how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light”.

This cry of the heart never changes. However many or few we are in this place, we are called to love, and if we find we cannot love, then at least we are called to pray until God transforms us, and we become everything we always longed to be.