

**Proper 18A – SJ – Love is the Fulfilling of the Law**

Romans 13:8-14 9/4/11

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

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Sad to say, there're not a whole lot of specifics that I remember from my college classes. One thing, though, has always stuck with me – particularly, perhaps, because I have always adored ice cream. I took a course in ethics, but it was a time that logical positivism and language analysis were the dominant trends in philosophy. What I remember, as a consequence, about the way the philosophers of the day discussed the meaning of the word “good” was that, in their opinion the word had no real meaning at all – that is, no meaning independent of my own personal prejudices and tastes.

And the way ice cream entered the conversation was that one illustration of what was meant by the term “good” was a phrase like “That pistachio ice cream is really good!” Well, that may be *my* sentiment, but it's not really a description of the intrinsic quality of the scoop of ice cream I have just devoured with such pleasure. *You* may not like pistachio ice cream at all, or that particular formulation of it may not conform to *your* notions of what it ought to taste like. So “*good*,” then, in this form of philosophical analysis, is no more than the most subjective definition of your own reaction to something. To the scoop of pistachio ice cream, it's merely shorthand for a satisfied exclamation like “Um, um, good!”

Now what does that experience have to do with today's reading from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome? Well, since I have often said that I just *love* ice cream, I think the whole discussion about whether “good” means anything independent of the feelings of the person using the word, would apply equally to the word *love*. Except that it is perfectly clear that Paul would have had apoplexy were he to have heard that discussion. Love, as he uses it in today's reading means not nothing but *everything*. And what he has to say about the word is really the same thing as Jesus himself was recorded as saying. What Paul says is that, when you look at the ten specific commandments that God delivered to Moses on those two stone tablets, they can, in fact, be summed up in the admonition to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Now, we know who our neighbor is from the story of the Good Samaritan. It is literally everyone we may encounter as we go through life – both those whom it is easy to love and those whom it is not so easy. We can fall in love with someone, but it isn't the emotion itself that constitutes real love. Rather it is the day-to-day effort we must put in that demonstrates it. In the third and fourth centuries of the Christian era, many men wanted to get away from the corruption of the still very pagan cities and therefore went out to the Egyptian desert to live monastic lives. The stories told by and about them not only make interesting reading, but can also be

very instructive for folks like us so many years later. One such story illustrates what it is to truly act out the principle of love in the toughest of circumstances. As told by Roberta Bondi, professor of Church History at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, the story, quoting from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, the story goes:

Going to town one day to sell some small articles, Abba Agathon met a cripple on the roadside, paralyzed in his legs, who asked him where he was going. Abba Agathon replied, "To town, to sell some things." The other said, "Do me the favor of carrying me there." So he carried him to the town. The cripple said to him, "Put me down where you sell your wares." He did so. When he had sold an article, the cripple asked, "What did you sell it for?" and he told him the price. The other said, "Buy me a cake," and he bought it.

"This questioning and demanding went on for the whole day, presumably, until Agathon was through selling his goods. Then the cripple asked,"

"Do me the favor of carrying me back to the place where you found me." Once more picking him up, he carried him back to that place. Then the cripple said, "Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth." Raising his eyes, Agathon saw [no one]; it was an angel of the Lord, come to try him.

Aside from the fact that this story, like others that tell us that we need to treat strangers well because they might actually be angels in disguise, ends with a sort of reward for the solicitous monk, it also reinforces the moral that it isn't what we feel, but what we do, that defines what constitutes love. And it is in this behavior, which cares more about the other than about the self, that we may find the true fulfillment of the law.

Paul tells us in today's reading from his letter to the Romans to "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And he recites some of the behaviors we should avoid. If you remember his travels, you may readily understand why he mentions "reveling and drunkenness, ...debauchery and licentiousness." He traveled, of course, to Athens. And last year I visited another of his stops where he founded a Christian community – Ephesus. I had always thought of it as a little fisherman's village. Little did I know! I discovered that, at between a quarter and a half a million population, behind Rome itself it was the second largest city of the empire. And Corinth, another of his stops, we know was a hotbed of licentious behavior. So, not unlike those desert fathers represented by Abba Agathon, he could easily have been repulsed by the behaviors he observed in such places. In fact there are hints elsewhere that that is the case. But it isn't only carousing that he condemns here. He also includes "quarreling and jealousy." And those sins are common to all of us. As St. Benedict points out, in his famous rules for how a monastery should function,

even those who have entered upon a religious life, away from the temptations of the flesh, are not going to get away from such sins.

Instead of enumerating all the rules by which we ought to live our lives, then, as various criminal codes may do in our everyday lives, Paul simplifies them all into that one summation – to love one’s neighbor as one would love oneself. Gee, sounds like he’s trying to make things easy for us, doesn’t it? Well, I think, in one sense at least he has succeeded. If we follow his advice, we needn’t go through life carrying around a checklist of rules that we must follow – sort of like the checklist a conscientious pilot might bring out every time he plans to fly his plane.

Instead, what counts – with respect to any act that affects another person – is not merely the act itself, but also the motivation that lies behind it. Is it done from love of the other person or to gratify the desires of the flesh, a word that Paul uses to represent not only the fleshy evils we usually associate with the term – those things covered by his condemnation of licentiousness and debauchery – but by anything that leads us to put our own desires before God and other people?

So, when we interact with others, what counts is not what we do so much as why we do it. To the extent that our actions are meant to build up our selves and our self-esteem – to gain points with others in our society or even with God – they are done with the wrong motives.

And – lest we fall into the trap of pitting Paul against the Jewish scriptures, as preachers so often do – let me close these musings with a quotation from the Old Testament that in its simplicity mirrors Paul’s own take on what is truly important in our behavior. It is the wonderful 8<sup>th</sup> verse of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of the prophet Micah, and is taken from the frequently very eloquent Jerusalem Bible translation:

This is what Yahweh asks of you:  
only this, to act justly,  
to love tenderly,  
and to walk humbly with your God.

So may we all! AMEN