

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 10, 2017 Year A
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.

AMEN

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“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

There seems to be a widening chasm in our world and society that is simply becoming more evident and more insidious each passing day. We have The Law standing on the precipice of one mountain, projecting out its fear of the “other” in retribution and rejection. We have Love standing in the valley, inviting The Law to come and reason with it. The Law stands firm, imperious in its belief that it is right **because it is written!**

Sadly over history, this has been embraced by some as the WHOLE meaning of the Christian faith. Our purpose is to monitor and police society on its morality instead of being a companion and life bearer of Divine Love. If you have not read the **Nashville Statement** produced by 150 evangelical Christian pastors, I encourage you to do so. You will read the meaning of what I am saying this day.

“What’s Love got to do with it” plaintively sang Tina Turner. Jesus says EVERYTHING! Love has EVERYTHING to do in our call to be **lawfully loving**.

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There are moments, just a few, when I am utterly flummoxed by Paul! Is this the same Paul who rattles on in seventy-five word sentences without punctuation about sin and grace? The same Paul who just a chapter before proclaimed the life of faith to be one in which we *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil ...”* and then concludes by saying, *“ ... for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”* And now he proclaims *“love is the fulfilling of the law.”*

I am sorry, but it cannot be that simple can it? To suggest that the entire ethics of Scriptures can be reduced down to a simple command **to love**, and that the one who has loved has fulfilled the law. If it were that simple, you would not need to employ someone like me to teach you the Scriptures! If this is all there is to it, you can surely work the rest out for yourself! Would not that make your next search for a rector easier! No, this cannot be so! This book requires professional training before you can really come to terms with its highly obscure and mysterious hidden messages.

Maybe we could explain this away as one of St Paul's more manic moments amongst what some believe to be a perpetual mania on the part of Paul. Except, when we drill down into this text, I am pretty sure Paul got this teaching from Jesus. Jesus who, when asked what the most important commandments were says that loving God and neighbor were the most important commandments. And Jesus went on to say, "*On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*" In other words, not only is the law of love central to Scriptures, but it is **the basis of every other law and command we find in Scriptures**. None of the other 613 laws or commandments can be understood except as applications of this law of love! I suspect that this is one of the reasons Jesus upset the religious Right-eous of his day. They feared that Jesus was going to put them out of work.

My understanding is that the basic job of a Rabbi is to give rulings from God's laws that apply to the different situations of life. You come to a Rabbi to ask anything from, "**Is it permitted for me to kill someone who has broken into my house?**" to "**Is it permitted for me to mix milk into my gravy?**" The Rabbi's job is to tell you it is permitted' or not based on his unravelling the multiple strands of the Torah. This is not an easy job, because the Mosaic law is long, complex, and convoluted. Clerics of the Islamic tradition have a similarly difficult job, for the Koran is a complex web of rules and regulations that require some expertise to navigate the in or out, right or wrong, and so on.

But not so for the Christian, according to St Paul and Jesus. All the law and the prophets, the totality of the exhortations in all of Scriptures are based on one simple command to love, and "*the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" So if you're in a situation where you are not sure what you should be doing or how to respond, all you need to ask is, **what does love dictate** and you have discerned the will of God! It seems it is that simple!

But let me take a moment to reflect on just how radical a formula that is a basis for a system of ethics. For it seems to me that the traditional religious basis for determining whether or not something is the will of God is not on the basis of whether or not it is loving, but on the basis of whether or not **it is written**.

Some of you remember the classic Monty Python film **Life of Brian**. Brian and his mother turn up to a stoning of some poor fellow for taking the Lord's name in vain. Brian asks, "**Why can't we take the Lord's name in vain, mum?**" She says, "**Because it is written. That's why.**" This seems to be a fairly obvious way of working out God's will, for all we need to do is to determine whether it is written in the book or not. If you pay attention to the world and church today, you will find all sorts of people telling us what we can and cannot do on the basis of **because it is written**. Just this week I read an post about the 40 mostly Caucasian and all male bishops of the Anglican Church of North America beginning discernment of considering the ordination of women in their branch of Christ's body. The real kicker for me is that **two ordained women** are part of the advisory panel!

What I experience in Paul's life in Christ is that using **because it is written** as the sole basis for making decisions about the will of God is something the early Christians of Paul's missionary gatherings very deliberately abandoned, **and it began with Jesus!** For example, we see this in Jesus' conflicts with His religious peers over his seeming disregard of the Sabbath laws.

You are not supposed to work on the Sabbath, as we all know. Why not? **Because it is written**, that's why not! Indeed it is **Number Four** in the Top Ten Commandments. Yet Jesus never seemed to get too worked up about the Sabbath. He eats, he heals, and he does any number of things that his religious peers consider to be work. When they challenge him, he says, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath!**" Jesus refused to simply take the commandment at face value, but instead **looked behind what was written** to grasp the principle which was one of God's love. God gave us the Sabbath so that we would rest and celebrate for God knows what we crazy workaholics are like. **The Sabbath is always for our sake It is always an act of love on God's part.**

It seems to me the Word of God made flesh in Jesus is constantly inviting we broken, complicated, fearful human beings from the temptation of **our demand for certitude**. The gift of our God of Love and the "love letters" we read is to deepen our openness to the Holy in ALL of created and creation, and to deepen our faith and **not needing to know** as our balance in our life. This is what Jesus does, and gives us a key for understanding all the laws of Scripture. They are **all about love!** If we make the mistake of trying to be loyal to the Scriptures without embracing the motivating power of love that lies behind them, we take our stand with the Scribes and the Pharisees who stayed true to what was written but had no love in their hearts. **Our primary job must be to safeguard the simplicity of the Gospel truth, and to stop us from over-complicating everything.**

What I believe to be the real division in our world, our society, and the church is not the division between Protestants and Catholics, or Liberals and Conservatives, or Orthodox and Evangelical, or any of those things. It is the distinction between **Christians who aim at perfection and Christians who aim at love**. So from the radical "love letter" of James, "*Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another speaks evil against the law and judges the law ... There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?*"

"What's Love got to do with it" Love has EVERYTHING to do in our call to be **lawfully loving**.

AMEN