



THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
SEPTEMBER 6, 2020
ROMANS 13: 8-14
POSITIVE, PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

SERMON

We can’t know what we don’t know.

This might seem like an obvious statement, but yet it is true: we can’t know what we don’t know.

For example, with the pandemic, I’ve had more time to tend to our lawn and flower garden. We also planted three tomato plants and one red pepper plant.

I didn’t know anything about planting specific flowers that attract and support birds, bees, and butterflies.



And even though a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, “I got me some larning about bees and blossoms.” We added a bird bath and a small water fountain. We planted lantana, zinnias, and calendula. And lo and behold, we’ve got birds zooming all around the place, multiple butterflies flying around our plants at any given moment, and bees a-buzzing. We even bought three end-of-the-season butterfly bushes to see if we could support monarch butterflies.

For those of you of advanced age, like me, it feels like I’ve turned into mister green jeans on captain kangaroo....

So, we can’t know what we don’t know.

Before this summer, if someone had asked me, “How come you don’t have any butterflies or bees in your flower garden, I would have answered, “I don’t know.”

But now I know, at least a little. I can choose whether or not to create an environment that is friendly to birds, bees, and butterflies.

Let’s apply this same logic to the spiritual world.

And for simplicity’s sake, I am going to paint with a wide brush and say, the teachings of Jesus can be summarized by two ideas: forgiveness and inclusion....

We’ve got this big old book called the bible with sixty-six books in the protestant bible and seventy-three in the roman bible. See how quickly it can get complicated?

So, let’s keep it simple.

The bible is the cradle in which we find the Christ child.

When it comes to our spiritual life, the person and teachings of Jesus are first and foremost. Matthew, mark, Luke, and john are the key books.



Jesus, his life, death and resurrection are central.

Second, we consider whatever books or passages that are consistent with his teachings as central to our understanding.

For example, the book of romans fits the bill for many mainline denominations, like Lutherans and Methodists. John Wesley of Methodist fame wrote that when he read Romans, he felt his heart strangely warmed. It could have been heartburn, but then again it could have been the scriptures.

And then we have all the other books which we evaluate by the same standards. How consistent are they with the teachings of Jesus?

The old testament proverb that reads something like “Let the poor man drink and forget his troubles” falls in the not very helpful category and far from the teaching of Jesus, even though it is in the bible....

Let’s return now to Jesus and his central ideas about forgiveness and inclusion.

And recall, we can’t know what we don’t know.

In ancient times, people struggled with the question, “What do I do when somebody treats me poorly? When someone does me wrong?”

If old Zachariah punches his neighbor, Samuel, in the nose was it okay for Samuel to set Zachariah’s house on fire as payback?

Eventually, the ancients decided that old Samuel overboard in burning down Zachariah’s house, so in the old testament we find what is called the law of talon: If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound. For what it’s worth, president trump calls this his favorite bible passage.



So, if old Zachariah punches neighbor Samuel in the nose, then Sam can return the favor, but no more

However, if we stick to our simple organizing principles, we must acknowledge that Jesus overrules this old testament perspective when he says, "You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, 'do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'"

Now this is actually quite a complicated statement, that we will get into another time, but what is important is that Jesus, the key and center of the scriptures, is redefining how we do relationship.

And violence against another is out.

Instead, Jesus will place forgiveness and reconciliation at the center of his teaching.

Why would he have to do this?

Because unless I misread human nature, retaliation and retribution is our first go-to.

Look around! The nation has been divided into warring camps. In some ways, we have regressed to pre-an eye for an eye times, where so many just want to do as much damage to the other as humanly possible.

Now here's what's interesting.

When we can't know what we don't know, we're really let off the hook. Spiritually, no one can be held responsible for what they don't know.

But once we know, we can no longer pretend that we don't know.



In fact, once we know, we are faced with an ethical dilemma.

Will we do the spiritual work to change our response when another person hurts us or will we say the hell with it and destroy that person on Facebook and do as much damage as we can in whatever way we choose?

Let's see....

Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Will we be peacemakers or work on our haymaker?

Forgiveness is about keeping our hearts open—when we close down our hearts again and again and again in the face of being hurt—the hurts start to add up.

We can become angry, bitter, resentful people.

What we can know is that because everything in all creation is broken, there will be lots of opportunities for us to be hurt.

Each of us has the ethical responsibility to decide our response....

Let's turn, then, to inclusion.

What is more dangerous than an individual causing damage is a group causing damage. This must be why Jesus dismantles the two sacred idols of his Semitic culture: work and family.

He tells many of his disciples to leave their fishing careers and tells Matthew to leave his tax collecting behind.

What most Christians of the "family values persuasion" have yet to come to terms with is that Jesus speaks in the book of Luke of hating your blood relatives if they are in the way of the gospel. Wow, then there are some family values, huh? Jesus even rejects his own mother in one of Matthew's stories.

"These are clear indications that we are talking about some form of radical discipleship, some change in lifestyle, some countercultural worldview and not



just religion as attendance at worship services. All three absolutes that keep people small and paranoid have been undone by Jesus: my identity or power group, my job, and my family.” (Richard Rohr)

And in this moment in history, we are deluged by small and paranoid people.

Small and paranoid people huddling in tribal groups ready to tear one another apart.

What is instructive is that, in the gospels, the outsiders to Jesus’ tribe understand him better than the tribal insiders.

A roman centurion calls him son of God
The syro-phoenician woman
The centurion’s servant
The Gerasene demoniac
The good Samaritan
The foreign leper
Zacchaeus

And other non-Jews all respond positively to Jesus

And what does he tell the outsiders?
I’ve never seen faith like yours within my tribe
Your faith has set you free
Go in peace

Before Jesus, religion was guided by tribal holiness laws. Read chapters 16-27 in the book of Leviticus for an unhealthy dose.

The old way is to separate yourself from people you considered sinful and to reject certain actions in people in order to keep yourself holy.

So why is Jesus central and key?



Because Jesus turns things on their head and now says that the very act of separation, superiority, and rejecting is now the spiritual problem!

And we can then draw a straight line to Paul's statement in the third chapter of Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

One tribe. All included.

And so, again, we can no longer pretend that we do not know. We are faced with another ethical dilemma. Will we do our spiritual work. Will we let this understanding of one tribe grow within our hearts and minds and spirits and souls, so that we work through our prejudices, our distortions, our misconceptions about those who, on the surface, are different from us?

They will know we are Christians by our love. In this case, love as forgiveness and inclusion.

SERMON SONG

We Shall Be Free (Garth Brooks)