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Sermon

Love and Reconciliation

Romans 13:8-14 ; Matthew 18:15-20 ; Ezekiel 33:7-11

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Today's readings give us three passages which interact with each other in an intriguing way. I will start with Paul's letter to the Romans to help our understanding of the other two.

We should be aware that this passage is a small part of a lengthy section starting at Romans 12:9 with the opening statement, "Let love be sincere." What follows is outworking of what loving community relationships look like. First let's clarify the word 'love' because we use it so loosely in English. Paul is here consistently using the strong Greek word for love, *agape*, or its verbal form. This is the love he describes in 1 Corinthians 13 – that passage so often read at weddings. *Agape* love is strong, concerned for the good of the other person, ready to make sacrifice for the good of the other. It has been described as an honest, consistent concern for other people that spills over into actions of all kinds.

When Paul wrote, "...he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law,"¹ he was obviously drawing on what Jesus had said in answer to the question, "What 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. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'²

His answer quoted two Old Testament passages:

Deuteronomy 6:5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Leviticus 19:17-18 Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.

Yes, if we truly love our neighbour we won't do things which would harm them. The examples Paul gives are from the social provisions of the Ten Commandments: Do not commit adultery; do not murder, do not steal, do not covet. If we truly love our neighbour, we will not do those things. When we love rightly, with the love inspired in us by the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but obey God's commandments.

However, saying 'Love your neighbour' does not set aside the need for moral rules. As Dr Douglas Moo writes, "... because our minds are not perfectly renewed and because we can misunderstand what love requires, we

¹ Romans 13:8

² Matthew 22:37-39

still need commandments to remind us of the absolute demands of God and to keep us on the straight and narrow.”³

Perhaps you think we don't need such commandments. Take the law change which legalised prostitution in New Zealand. It was done with the intention of decriminalising vulnerable women. But, Helen and I have in the past ministered to two young women who had gone into prostitution and naively thought it was moral because it was legal – one was even encouraged that way by her mother! I have ministered to three men in New Zealand who has used prostitutes who believed or managed to convince themselves it was moral because it was not illegal.

Again, I am sorry to raise matters of morality, but if we never talk about them, people can form a wrong appreciation of what our faith says. Someone told me once that he thought the Anglican Church had no objection to casual sexual relations because he had never heard it mentioned. Well that is a failure in our teaching ministry.

It is clear that simply to say, “love your neighbour” is not sufficient – Paul has to say to them put aside the deeds of darkness and behave decently. Remember he is writing to a church and he tells them not to indulge in orgies and drunkenness, sexual immorality, jealousy and dissension. These were specific commands which were needed in that community. Love for your neighbour is not consistent with sexual immorality in any form. We must not justify lust for another by confusing it with *agape* or that God's standards are set aside. The very clear teaching of the Bible is that sexual union is good and proper - inside a permanent committed marriage. Fornication (which is sex outside marriage whether casual or cohabitation) and adultery (where a married person has a sexual relationship outside that marriage) are specifically stated to be immoral and unacceptable to God.

Paul also warns about drunkenness, dissension and jealousy. Both in Romans and in Ephesians, Paul teaches Christians not to get drunk. He doesn't say do not drink, but that we should not get drunk and lose control of ourselves – it destroys families and does much damage in community. So too, family and community life are easily destroyed by jealousy and argumentativeness.

C.S. Lewis helps us reset our focus. He wrote:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. ⁴

The main point I want to take from the Romans is that we are taught to love our neighbours - that is to desire the best for those people with whom we interact.

I said earlier that Jesus had quoted from Leviticus when he gave the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves. It surprised me to find that the passage in Leviticus touches all three of our readings. Besides, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, there is a parallel to our other two passages: “Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in his guilt.” ⁵

Ezekiel was instructed by God that when he was given a message to warn someone of their sin, he was responsible to deliver the message. If he did not, and the person died in their sin, then the prophet was responsible for their death. However, if he was faithful to his task, the person was responsible because they had been warned and had refused the warning.

³ Moo, D.J., 2000, *The NIV Application Commentary – Romans*, Leicester, IVP, p437

⁴ Quoted from “The Weight of Glory”

⁵ Lev 19:17

And that brings us to the gospel passage. Jesus applies a related logic when he tells us to go and seek reconciliation with those who have hurt us.

The process laid out by Jesus for dealing with someone who has sinned against us could easily be seen as a means of asserting our right against them. We could see this as applying increasing pressure on them until they either buckle or we can rid of them! But that would be a very negative interpretation.

If we look at the context, we find it is just after Jesus has told the parable of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to find the lost one. We have heard two other voices from scripture informing us: Romans telling us to act out of love; Ezekiel telling us that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather has pleasure when they turn from their ways and live.⁶

These all direct us differently. The process Jesus lays out is to rescue the sinner. It is not so much about satisfaction for the offended as restoration of the offender that there may be fellowship again. That is an important attitude for us to keep in mind.

I strongly commend the principle of this process to us all – not because it is a hot issue at present - rather because isn't we can consider it without heightened emotion or suspicion.

The process is careful and respectful. If we want to restore fellowship, it is far more likely to be successful if we go one to one and try to sort things out first. We don't escalate the conflict in public - that will only get the other person's back up and make them more resistant.

If we post on social media, write unkind or angry comments about someone else it is difficult to come back from there. People these days write abusive comments so quickly online it is astonishing. Just don't do it. It is punishing behaviour, not reconciling actions. Don't confuse that behaviour with what Jesus is talking about here.

I am going through this because I don't often see it followed. Perhaps people don't know or don't take it seriously. Or maybe we are too afraid of conflict. Let's try to be brave enough to be vulnerable. Because to go to someone and say, "When you did that, it hurt me," makes us vulnerable to further hurt unless we put up an aggressive defence – which is not the Christlike way of dealing with it.

If you have a disagreement, be straightforward, don't exaggerate, don't abuse the other person. Communication is usually better in person because the written word can appear more severe than we mean and it is not interpreted by the intonation and body language we might use in person. If you do decide to write rather than speak, do review and edit it carefully looking for unfortunate phrasing and expressions which would be easily misunderstood.

If you do want to follow Jesus' way, you will go and explain rather than accuse. Be aware that however it appeared to you, they may not have meant what you thought they did. Maybe they will listen to you and you can reconcile. Maybe you will discover they had already been offended by you and you have something to apologise for.

Any of us could find ourselves on either side of such a conversation. If we need to apologise, don't use those weasel words, so popular with officials, "If I have done anything to hurt you, I apologise." That is code for, "I don't think I have done anything but you have taken offence and I am forced to say this which I don't mean anyway" - it never satisfies. Acknowledge that you have offended or done injury to the other person (whether or not you meant to), say you are sorry and ask forgiveness. The other person needs to grant that forgiveness as a completion of the process they started. It needs to be said, "I forgive you." These words, if sincerely meant, bring healing.

Of course, Jesus is realistic that this one to one approach may not resolve the issue. David McClister comments, "So important is the fixing of a sin-damaged relationship between disciples that a disciple's effort to regain his brother must encompass ever-widening sources of help. Eventually a disciple must enlist the help of the whole church in the effort to regain the one brother."

⁶ Ez 33:11

But note, you don't publicise it to the world; no letters to the editor; no gossiping around the golf greens.

You know the fellowship we are talking about between believers is more than what is visible. It is a fellowship between God and each of the believers as well as between humans. Maybe that is why after teaching on being reconciled, Jesus adds:

"Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."⁷

I know it is normally read in terms of answered prayer or authority, but could it be about the fruit of unity? When we are able to reconcile, when we are at peace with each other, then Jesus is known in our midst.

From our readings today, the highlights are the underlying importance of true love for other people behind God's moral commandments. And that true love in us seeking to restore relationships where we have been offended or hurt by others.

As we live his ways, may we increasingly know his presence among us and his pleasure over us, his children.

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⁷ Matthew 18:19-20