

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 13:8-14
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I have a little devotional book in my collection that I always have handy. It's called *A Common Prayer*, by Michael Leunig. It's a wonderful little book. Each page has a very simple illustration on it, and the sayings or the prayers in the book are very brief and straightforward. You could read through this book in 30 minutes if you so chose. And it could change your life in 30 minutes. These prayers are so simple and yet in their simplicity are so profoundly meaningful.

The final page reads like this: "Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and as difficult as that. There is no other way. Amen." In the book, "Love one another and you will be happy," is in quotation marks. So Leunig is acknowledging that this is not an original idea! "Love one another and you will be happy." In verse eight of Romans chapter 13 we hear: "Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." This is Paul writing to the church in Rome, a church he has not met, a church he did not found. Paul was going to go to Rome on his way to Spain. He knew he needed to know the church in the capitol of the Empire. He knew he needed to know the church at the crossroads of the world. So Paul wrote the church in Rome a letter to introduce himself. Chapters 1-12 are heavily theological. Paul lays out his case for who he understands Jesus Christ to be within the framework of Jewish theology. Then in Chapter 13 he turns to the more practical: How does a church function? What makes us different from the world? How do we put the theology he's been writing about into practice in a meaningful way? That's what the second part of Romans does. It talks about what in theology is called *praxis*, how do you put into praxis what we know intellectually? Another way to put it is: How do you make the rubber meet the road?

"Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Later on in the passage Paul writes: "The commandments are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" All of Jewish theology can be summed up in the words, "Love your neighbor as yourself." interestingly, in the biblical text when we read: "Love your neighbor as yourself," it is in quotation marks. It wasn't original to Paul! "All of the commandments are summed up in this one word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

There was a man in early Church history named Origen. He was born around 185 AD and he died around 254 AD. He lived in Alexandria, one of the great early centers of Christian thinking. Origen was a Bible scholar, and a theologian. He is an early Church Father, but at the end of the day he was a biblical scholar. We do have some of his writings preserved for us. Many of them are in Latin translation. We also have some of Origen's sermons, and other than the pieces of the New Testament that are sermons, Origen's sermons are some of the earliest Christian sermons we have. So, Origen is an extremely important figure in Christian history. About today's opening verse, Romans 13:8, this is what Origen said: "The debt of charity (and here charity is clearly synonymous with love) is permanent, and we are never quit of it for we must pay it daily and yet always owe it." This is an early Church Father's interpretation of Paul's understanding of love. "The debt of charity is permanent, and we are never quit of it for we must pay it daily and yet always owe it." The foundation of the church's life is love, says Origen, says Paul, says Jesus. Another way to translate Origen is this: "Let your only debt that is unpaid be that of love. A debt which you should always be attempting to discharge in full, but will never succeed." It's a brilliant interpretation, pay on your debt of love daily, intending to discharge it but understand that you never will.

Christians are called to love. When that's easy, and when it is extremely hard. It's our starting point for community life. Ultimately it is the message we have for the world. Rather than hatred and indifference, rather than selfishness, and 'Might makes right,' the message of the Church is love. And however nuanced the message needs to be to meet different situations, the overarching theme is always to be love of God, and love of neighbor. So in writing to the church in Rome, Paul is trying to make crystal clear what the implications of the Gospel that he'd been telling them about are, where the rubber hits the road. He tells them this in Romans 13:8: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Every time we gather, ultimately the purpose is the same: to praise God, and to offer thanksgiving for his love. And our recollection of God's love for us is our reminder, is our challenge to love one another in this community of faith. And that love for each other, then, is our offer to the community, and ultimately to the world.

Another early Church Father was named Tertullian, from Carthage, what we know now as Tunisia. Tertullian is as important to the church's history as Origen is. Tertullian's vision for the Church was this: He envisioned a church where people outside of the Church would say of the Church: "See how they love each other." That's why we're here! To love each other the way Christ loves us. To forgive one another and then to go forth, every week, with a mission, with a challenge, with an opportunity to take the love we've been given and give it away in the community. Amen.