

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Loving Together
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
August 30, 2020

Exodus 20:1-17; Romans 13:8-14

He could hear the noise all the way down the hallway and he knew who was making it. The principal had hoped that this new teacher would do the trick and that she could handle “that class.” You know “that class.” Every year in a school there is “that class” of kids who cannot be controlled and who become famous for being unruly. And this, “that class” had driven their previous teacher into resigning. In great frustration the principal got up from his desk and made his way to the classroom. Using his principal voice, he gained control and then took the teacher out into the hallway. Even though it was her first day of teaching, ever, he expected her to do better and to bring order out of this chaos, otherwise the students would never learn anything. The next day, there was no chaos in that class. There was only order, for the woman who would become my mother had gotten the message and made sure that her class would no longer be “that class.” Order versus chaos, the story of the universe...the story of the Bible.

I say that order versus chaos is the story of the Bible because from the opening verses of the scriptures until the final few chapters of Revelation, this book (the Bible) tells the story of God’s desire for and work toward order over chaos. We see God bringing order out of chaos in Genesis chapter one, when God calms the angry chaos of the waters. We see it in Revelation when God forms a symmetrical heaven on earth city where all the chaos of the world is kept outside of its gates. And what we need to note about this desire and work of God for order is not done because God has a control complex, but because order allows life to flourish. Chaos on the other hand brings nothing but destruction and death. Unfortunately for the world, we human beings almost always seem to choose chaos over order...meaning we choose war over peace, violence of reconciliation, abuse over love, discrimination over equality and injustice over justice. We choose things that might for an instant bring order, but they fail to create an environment where real human flourishing can take place. We offer illusions of order, rather than the order God desires.

The fascinating thing about God is that God never gives up this desire to create an orderly creation in which all persons can flourish. We see this desire for order in God’s choosing a people to be a light to the world in order to demonstrate what human flourishing looks like, that could show the world what human flourishing looked like. Knowing full well that the Hebrews were no more inclined to order than any other people, God gave them the Torah, the Law, which was intended to order their lives in such a way that every member of their community could reach their full potential and that the community itself would be, in Biblical terms, a blessed community. We can see this orderliness in our Old Testament Lesson this morning which was the Ten Commandments. These commandments, just to be clear, are only a small portion of God’s Law, but they can give us a sense of how God’s order was to safeguard all persons and insure their flourishing.

This vision of God as a God of order and of the Law was central to the Jewish identity, but not so to the identity of the early Gentile church. The church in Rome, as a largely a Gentile church, was composed of those who had spent their lives worshipping the gods of Rome and understanding order, not as intended for the flourishing of all people, but as the power of the sword; the power of the rich and powerful citizens and their allies to crush the vast majority of human beings in the Empire beneath their boot. It was called the Pax Romana, meaning the Peace of Rome, but it was peace and flourishing only for those at the top of the heap. The question for Paul then was how could he help the Roman Christians understand what this God of order and not chaos desired of them? How could he help them become a community of order and not chaos without giving in to the brutality of the Empire? This would not be easy...and yet Paul was able to do this with a single word, love.

Paul begins this short section with these words, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Paul can tell his Roman readers that love fulfills the Law, not because it takes the place of the law, but because when human beings love one another, meaning when human beings look to the wellbeing of others as much as or more than to their own wellbeing, when human beings work to insure justice and resist injustice, when human beings offer forgiveness rather than seeking revenge...all of which are outgrowths of love, then there is true order. There is human flourishing. We can see how Paul connects the dots between order and chaos when he writes, “let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” The word “honorably” in this text can be better translated as “in order,” as in decently and in order. Meaning to live not in the chaos of lives that tear down individuals and communities, but as if we are clothed in Jesus Christ, and live in love.

So what about us? How are we to live out this love? One way to do this is to step out and love our neighbors that we have not met, that we do not know, that are different from us. And one way for us to do this as a congregation is to live into our commitment to be a Matthew 25 Congregation. For those of you who watched my Wednesday update, I let you know that after two months of prayer, discussion and discernment, the session had agreed to have us become a Matthew 25 congregation. Matthew 25 is a movement within the PCUSA, our denomination that asks congregations to engage in one or more of the following demonstrations of love as part of their work; building congregational vitality, eradicating systemic poverty or dismantling structural racism. Each of these is an expression of love of neighbor. So what does this look like exactly? I really don't know. But in my Wednesday video update I said that I would answer a question, which was, what does being a Matthew 25 congregation require of us? I did so because many of you have expressed concerns that by becoming a Matthew 25 church, we might be obligating ourselves to do all sorts of outrageous things. If this is what you thought, then you are correct. We are called to do all sorts of outrageous things because we are called to love. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are called to choose order over chaos in that we are to love in such a way that all human beings have an opportunity to flourish.

You may say to me, “But John, we have always tried to do this.” And that is true. I believe that to the best of our understanding of the world we have indeed tried to do this. But what Paul reminds us is that loving in this way; loving such that God’s justice is made real in the world, isn’t an option. It is a debt we owe the world. I say this because Paul begins this ode to love with these words, “Owe no one anything, except to love.” What this means is that sacrificial love for all human beings is the debt we owe to God for God’s infinite love for us in Jesus Christ. God loved us enough to become one of us, die for us, forgive us and continue to be for us. The debt we owe is to be a community that works toward a flourishing world for all people through working toward eradicating systemic poverty, dismantling structural racism and building a vibrant community. In these ways we show forth the love of God for all human beings.

My challenge to each of you for this coming week is to pray about and consider which of these areas might be of interest to you as a way of showing love. I do so because the Diversity, Inclusion and Justice Committee of our church will be proposing that the session create workgroups to address each of these areas of loving our neighbor and I want each of us to be ready to participate in those groups. So pray, discern and seek God’s leading as together we begin to repay our debt of love to God by loving others.