

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
A Relentless Pursuit of Reconciliation
September 10, 2023
Romans 13.8

You may notice that our two readings this morning --Matthew's gospel and the epistle reading from Romans—don't necessarily or obviously have to do with ecology in any particular way, except they have to do with relationships. And the definition of ecology is at its heart the study of relationships. For Christians, the heart of relationships made known to us in the persons of the Trinity made one in God and in the life of the Church, the aspiration that God has for the Church, the name of relationship is love. These passages are both about love. So in a way, you could say they are about a human ecology, which extends beyond our relationships with one another to all Creation. And so we are invited to hold all of this together as we reflect on Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel about our reconciliation and Paul's words in Romans about the high call to live our faith with one another.

Both of these are about love. It's not romantic love necessarily, but love shared and sometimes love violated between people in the community. "Owe no one anything," Paul writes, "except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." That's a big statement about the importance of love. A couple of verses later he writes, "All the commandments are summed up in this word: love your neighbor as yourself."

Love is the heart of the commandments, Paul writes. Love is the fulfillment of God's desire for our relationships with one another. Of course, this is just scratching the surface of all the Bible has to say about love.

Think of what Paul also wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, describing love as patient and kind; or think of what we read in 1 John. *Let us love one another for love is from God . . . God is love.* Or the verse that may be the most well-known: *For God so loved the world, he gave his only-begotten son.*

Love is at the heart of the Gospel and of Christian life. But love is hard. Love is hard when you're actually practicing it, and it's not just an idea or an ideal. Love is hard, even in marriage, and that's why the traditional marriage vows are so aspirational and so clear-eyed—in sickness and health, in riches and poverty, in good times and bad. Love is hard. It's hard in friendships—from school years to old age--sometimes feelings get hurt. It's hard with neighbors when misunderstandings happen, and with enemies for sure—love your enemy? That's especially hard.

We talk about love and friendship and caring for one another as if it's the most natural, easiest thing in the world. If the church would just love, everything would be better, some say. Sure. But that's so a generic thing to say; such a vague, squishy cliché of what love is that as a concept or as an ethic for life it hardly does more than a non-stick pan. Real life just slides right off. Real life and real love are messier than that. Both Jesus and Paul understood this.

The whole Bible does. John 3:16 is immediately followed by a long discourse, not on candy hearts and friendship bracelets, but on how when people love, sometimes what they love is the darkness more than the light. In 1 John, the warm embrace of God is love is followed by “If anyone says I love God and hates his brother or sister, he is a liar.” And even 1 Cor 13, the love chapter in the Bible, is a list of negations—what love it not: arrogant or rude, insisting on its own way, rejoicing in wrongdoing. Why does it need to say that? Because those are things we do. The next chapter begins with the evocative challenge: pursue love. Like you have to chase it, like you have to desire it, like it is outside of you and you have to try to run toward it.

A starting place for pursuing love in Romans 13 is basic, even if it’s not always simple, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” That’s not a bad place to start. The law, Paul quotes several of the 10 commandments, governs life in community by establishing some norms for communal living: don’t commit adultery with each other, don’t kill each other, don’t steal from each other, don’t covet what each other another has. Those are good places to start, but they’re just a starting point. Not killing each other is a pretty good place to start. Not hurting each other with words or deeds, not inflicting wounds by carelessness and selfishness. These are the building blocks; they give us something to work with.

I had a teacher who made the point that that even people who say they don’t believe in pacifism, are probably already some version of pacifists. He challenged us. He said if your neighbor walks his dog over onto your property and the dog does its business on your finely manicured lawn and you just don’t shoot your neighbor, you’re at least little bit a pacifist. Just a little bit. Not killing your neighbor when you’re angry, it’s a start. It’s a start we can’t take for granted in a culture whose anger and violence often quickly leads to tragedy. But it’s a start, and loving your neighbor has to start somewhere. But it has to go somewhere, too. Obviously we can agree that love isn’t just not doing horrible things to someone. This is not the fulfillment, but the start of the life that Christians are to embody.

For Jesus, love binds his followers together, even when there’s pain or problems between them. Bound by his love they do not walk away easily; they work hard to remain bound to him and one another. In Matthew 18, Jesus describes a relentless pursuit of reconciliation when relationship is broken. When relationship is broken, go to the person, tell them. If that doesn’t work, take others with you. If that doesn’t work, take it to the community. If that doesn’t work, if you just can’t be in relationship with this person—and sometimes that happens—treat them as a Gentile or tax collector—who remember, are people you’re praying for in Christ. Live long enough, it really doesn’t take very long—and you know this wisdom is needed because sometimes bad things happen between people, sometimes horrible things are done to one another; sometimes there’s misunderstanding, sometimes there’s hurt. Life is messy that way. And sometimes, we are on one side of it, and sometimes we’re on the other. So, when it is, do everything you can to restore relationship until you just can’t anymore. And when you can’t, still, that person is beloved of God and worthy of your prayer and hope for redemption.

The relentless pursuit of reconciliation is deeply rooted in God’s nature. God’s love incarnate in the flesh of Jesus Christ is a relentless pursuit of reconciliation. God’s desire is reconciliation of all things, and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. God, as Father, Son, Holy Spirit, is

eternally relational. When our relationships are fractured, whether with a friend or in a marriage or family or with a neighbor, God desires reconciliation. When there's hurt, God desires healing. When there's sin, God desires repentance and forgiveness. When there's a rift, God desires a reunification. This is just God's nature.

Jesus knows this is hard. He knows sometimes, for the time being at least, it is not possible on our own, but this is still God's heart. Consider the language used in this passage: heaven and earth, and the numbers two and three. Heaven and earth are cosmologically as far apart as possible, and yet, in Christ's two natures heaven and earth are united. God and humans are as far different as possible as Creator and created, yet when two or three are gathered, Christ is with us.

God's desire for reconciliation between humans is an expression of God's desire for reconciliation of all things, all creation. Our care for creation is not just supposed to be doing creation no harm or as little harm as we can muster, but a relationship fulfilled by the compassion of love. This is God's heart for reconciliation of all broken things—for us to confront the places of brokenness and do whatever is in our power to bring about restored relationship, even if that can only mean praying with tears.

Perhaps living in loving community with any other individual; perhaps living in loving community is beyond our normal operational capacity. It's just so much easier to retreat, and sometimes, we need to. Many days, it probably seems that way in every kind of relationship a person can have. We aren't to be naïve, nor are we to just accept another's abuse toward us, and it's always important to say that when we are talking about God's heart of reconciliation, God's heart of reunification and forgiveness. It's always important in the world we live in to say very clearly to not just accept another person's endless abuse against us, but we are always to be hopeful in what God hopes for. Anytime we practice love, we participate, somehow or another, in the cosmic drama of God's reconciliation of the world to himself.

What the New Testament means by love is embodied concretely in the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." All creation receives and bears and bears witness to the heart of Christ, which is the heartbeat of all creation and the hope of its groaning.

Jesus understood it would not always be easy. His disciples even had their turmoil. He also understood something else deeply. God's way is to do everything possible to hold on to one another, to hold on to community as long as it can be borne, and to tell and be willing to hear the truth from one another. This is love.

Love isn't just in the treetops, love is in the weeds, in the muck and mud. Some say good fences make good neighbors. Maybe so, but strong bridges over deep chasms is where friendship is made and where faith is at work and where hope holds the light, and where there greatest of these, love, still abides. Amen.