

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 13:1-10
September 6, 2020

“The Law of Love”

It’s Labor Day weekend, the unofficial end of summer, and we usually think of backyard cookouts and gatherings that lead into the start of the new school year. In the midst of whatever plans we may have for this 3-day weekend, this federal holiday recognizes and pays tribute to the men and women of our nation’s work force who have contributed so much to the development and achievements of our society. A favorite book of my girls when they were small was *What Do People Do All Day?*, by Richard Scarry. It’s a great book that helps young children understand the mysterious world of work that their parents are involved in. This is a real question that kids ask: what do people do all day? Sometimes when we as adults get home at the end of the day, we ask ourselves that same question: “What did I do all day?” Some days are like that. Work and labor for many people have changed dramatically over these last six months. Some continue to work remotely from home while others have returned to the office. When will things get back to normal – that is, pre-COVID 19? That’s the question we’re all asking ourselves, and for which there is no real answer yet. Today, the Word of God calls us to a different kind of work – work that seeks **“to do no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”** (Romans 13:10). That Epistle lesson is before us in today’s sermon under the theme, “The Law of Love.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Labor Day is not on the church’s calendar, but there is something here that the church would do well to pay attention to. Work, the daily offering of ourselves and our God-given skills and abilities, is meant to be more than just drudgery; just counting the days until the weekend rolls around. After God created Adam and before the fall into sin, we read in Scripture that **“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it”** (Genesis 2:15). This means that work came before sin, and it was intended by God to be something fulfilling, satisfying, and rewarding. The origins of words fascinate me – where they come from, what they originally meant. On this Labor Day weekend, we can compare two words that have vastly different meanings: vocation and career. Both come from the Latin language. The word vocation comes from a Latin word, *vocatio*, meaning “calling.” The calling to a particular occupation comes from outside us; it comes from the Lord. A vocation is anything that is honorable and that serves not only our needs, but those of our neighbor as well. The other word, career, also comes from a Latin word, *carrera*, meaning “to run, a race,” and by extension, to run that race around a racetrack where you just sort keep going in circles over and over again. How do we understand the work that we do? Is it an offering of ourselves to God? Is it a calling that comes from God that utilizes our God-given skills and abilities? Or is it running some race that just keeps us going round and round?

Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans somewhere in the mid- to late-50s of the first century A.D. So when Paul wrote those opening words from today’s Epistle lesson, **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God”** (Romans 13:1), he wrote this while living under Roman rule and when Nero himself was Emperor (54-68 A.D.). This is the same Nero who proved to be no friend to the Christians, and under whom Paul himself was executed (ca. 64 A.D.). And yet, Paul wrote what he did about being subject to the governing authorities, and paying to those authorities what is owed them: **“taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed”** (Romans 13:7). When we look at our own fractured society today, beset by distrust and disbelief of those in leadership, grappling with underlying racial tensions that continue to plague our society, confronting threats of violence and destruction, we would do well to remember what Paul has said here. Whether the person in authority is someone we support and voted for is not the issue. With opposing sides slandering and demonizing each other, there is tremendous work that

lies before us to bind up the wounds of our nation. All of the unrest and turbulence in our nation right now may serve the greater purpose of awakening us all to more responsible and involved citizenship, something which we can never take for granted. It will take all of us – every man, woman, and child – to forge ahead and put the best construction on everything for the common good of our nation.

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8, 10). Can we love those whom we do not like? Can we love those with whom we disagree? Can we love those whom we find it hard to respect? Yes, with God’s help. This is exactly what God in Christ has done for us, even when we were dead in our sins and trespasses (Ephesians 2:4-5). God owes us nothing, but has given us everything. Jesus loved us literally unto death, even death on the cross (Philippians 2:5-11), where he died the death that we deserved because of our sins and trespasses. **In the death of Jesus, we have been given a new life – life that looks beyond our own selfishness to the things of God. Life that looks not only to our own interests, but to the interests of others. We are now called to love our neighbor, no matter who that neighbor is, what that neighbor looks like, or where that neighbor comes from. To love another, including a person whom we do not like or respect, means that you are choosing to do good rather than evil. It is a conscious decision that goes beyond emotions. Such love comes from outside us. As we have been loved by God in Christ, so we are to love each other – period.** It is this faith active in love that transforms lives from the inside out through the power of the Holy Spirit. Such transformation is not something that can be mandated by law or enforced by regulation. It is the law of love, remembering that **“we love because he first loved us”** (1 John 4:19). It is the saving love of Jesus, who has fulfilled all the requirement’s of God’s Law in our behalf, that opens our hearts to love one another.

It is this love that moves us to humble ourselves and become like little children for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-4). It is this love that causes us to despise and cut away the temptations to sin that come to us as radically as if we were amputating one of our very limbs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:7-9). It is this love that moves us to seek out the one member of the flock who has gone astray for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:10-14). It is this love that moves us to speak the truth in love to our brother or sister (Ephesians 4:15, 25), including and especially when there is a grievance and one has sinned against the other for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. It is not a question if this will happen, but when. This is to be expected within the Body of Christ, and Jesus’ admonition for handling this is our own roadmap to this day (Mathew 18:15-20). It is this love that moves us to follow what Jesus has told us to do here. It is love – Jesus’ love – that moves us, with God’s help, to repair fractured relationships in the Body of Christ, remembering that **“whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”** (Matthew 18:18).

As Jesus has loved us, so we are to love one another. This is our calling in Christ. This is the law of love. May God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.