

Sermons at Christ Church

Bound to Christ in Love and Hope.

Pentecost 15

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“Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law.” St. Paul advised the Christians in Rome. Two things that Paul had in mind. First, the coming of the Lord is near. Two, we must prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. And the only way to prepare ourselves is to owe no one anything but love. This is not a surprising advice because to be in debt could be the basis for enslavement. Debt reduces your dignity and creates unnecessary peril.

Many years ago, when I first emigrated to the US, I didn’t have a bed and so I had to sleep on the couch. We were four young students sharing a two-bedroom apartment. I had a room but no bed. One of my roommates who had emigrated to the US about six months before I arrived, shared glowing tribute about credit cards. He encouraged me to get a credit card as soon as possible.

Because I didn’t have a social security number, I had to apply for my number and then apply for a Capital One credit card. Thankfully, I was approved and within a few days my shiny credit card arrived in the mail with a limit of \$300.00. That was pretty shocking to someone who had just arrived from Ghana.

It wasn’t much money, but it was enough for me to start spending. I got myself a mattress with boxspring, and that was more than enough for me.

When you begin to spend, it feels like it’s your own money. You get lost in your own world of sufficiency and adequacy. It is like you don’t need anyone because you have what you need.

It didn’t take long for me to receive a bill in the mail. My roommate who encouraged me to apply for the card said to me that you need to make a payment. Just make the minimum payment if you don’t have enough money-and then he added this caveat-that is how you build your credit. What is credit? I asked.

Having the card in my wallet felt good, it felt like some free money that was available anytime I needed it. But the bill reminded me that I was in debt and I had to make payment on that debt.

When you live from hand-to-mouth, paycheck-to-paycheck, and you have a credit card debt, the tendency is to make the minimum payment. Paying off the debt depends on how much disposable income you have. And until such a time that you have more than enough to make substantial payment, you just make that minimum payment which turns out to be expensive in the long run. Until you pay off the debt, you are beholden to the bank.

To owe no one anything except love is to understand that love is not like a credit card for which you receive a monthly bill or max it out or have a limit or pull it out when you run out of cash. Love is this constant force which helps us look at others with eyes that only seek the best for them and us. Love is this redeeming grace which helps us to understand others the way we want to be understood. Love is this forgiving heart that lowers itself to the level of those who have fallen and assures them that they deserve to be loved.

Love is this beauty that always points to the beauty in us and others and draws us ever more deeply into that beauty. Love is this gift which glories in emptying itself of everything because it treasures the opportunity to draw deeply from itself to give to others.

Love is the grace which reminds us not to give up on those who are down and out because that is when you need love the most. Love is this mercy which seeks to welcome the prodigal because it is an endless stream. Love is the part of us which reminds us that wherever there's the greatest necessity, there's the greatest opportunity to serve. It always beckons us to serve.

Love is that part of the human experience that doesn't only consume hate but knows that hatred can destroy us and so it warns us against hatred for others. I once read a story where at the last press conference of former President Nixon, he said this "Always remember others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them and then you destroy yourself." That was a poignant moment when the former president realized that his hatred for his enemies didn't destroy those enemies, but it destroyed him.

Love-that is the only debt we owe to one another, and to embrace this idea of love is to understand that it is not about building credit, it is about fulfilling the law.

There is a story of a monk who was invited by a college professor to teach his class. When the monk got to the class, he picked a chalk and wrote on the chalkboard "Everyone wants to change the world, but nobody wants to help their mom do the dishes."

We may never get the opportunity to do big things, but we can always do small things. And it starts by helping mom with the dishes.” Love is the gift of knowing that small acts do go a long way in shaping lives.

According to Paul, understanding and embracing this love is the only thing we must owe anyone, and actually appreciating that debt is what should incentivize us, motivate us, drive us and encourage us to always go above and beyond to repair the broken and frayed ties and to seek reconciliation. Appreciating this debt would mean that we must always go outside of our comfort zone to repair the damage that we have done or others have done.

The gospel story brings to light that within the body of the faithful there would be times when we will sin against each other. We don’t get the sense that being a Christian or a member of the church doesn’t mean you cannot sin. Yes, you can and we do.

Jesus lays out three steps towards reconciliation, first approach the offender for an apology. Two, if the offender doesn’t offer an apology, take two or three members with you and seek that apology. Three, if the offender doesn’t offer an apology, let the whole church know what the offender did.

It isn’t for nothing that Jesus invites us to take these extra steps towards reconciliation. Quite apart from the value in being reconciled, all the attempts are an expression of the debt of love we owe.

In fact, last Sunday, during the announcement, I felt like it had gone on for a little too much and so I asked Pam to hold off on her announcement till next week. On Monday, the boss lady told me that I may have offended Pam. I called Pam and apologized, and she gladly accepted my apology. The point here is that when we offend each other, the principle must always be one where we find great value in extending grace and receiving grace.

The idea is the recognition that so long as the church remains a hospital for sinners, the church must always hold itself out as an example of a forgiving community.

There is story of a man who went to his Rabbi and said to him “Rabbi, you would never believe what happened to me. My son left the house and became a Christian.” The Rabbi said “Shhhh you would never believe what happened to me. My son left the house too and became a Christian.” So what do we do? Asked the gentleman. Let’s pray to God. The Rabbi said. They prayed to God and God said “You never believe what happened to me. My son also left the house and became a Christian.”

I heard the story of a visiting Chinese professor at Missouri State University. One of the members of a congregation who was this professors colleague invited her to worship at her church. The professor wasn't a Christian but had Buddhist background. On her first day at the church, just before worship began, she started to weep. She later communicated to her friend that she had never felt such a powerful presence of the love of God.

For the two years that she was in Missouri State, she went to church every Sunday, and she wept every time she went to church. The presence of the holy God of love made her weep. The love that is so freely given made her weep. The love that binds hearts and minds made her weep. The love that injects purpose and meaning into our lives made her weep. The love which always calls us into reconciliation made her weep. The love that saves and redeems our broken lives made her weep. Have you ever wept for this love? Have you been so moved to shed a tear because of the overwhelming presence of the love of God?

If you are to owe anyone anything, owe them love because that is the one commodity that you can afford-it is not sold at the store, it is not a credit card, it is not given by the bank and you don't have to work for it, it has been freely given to you-ain't nothing better than this free gift which is also our debt.

Amen.