

SERMON FOR FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 6, 2020
Westminster Presbyterian Church -Rehoboth Beach

LESSONS (*see complete text at the end of the sermon*):

Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

“Deep in Debt”

In 1984 I encountered two memorable events, one painful the other fabulous. First, my first wife and I had separated that summer and were going through the painful process of legal separation. I ended up saddled with all of the marital debts; and I was deep in debt. I tried to work things out, figure out a way to pay-off everything but there was no way out. Finally I visited a bankruptcy lawyer and began the difficult and embarrassing process of declaring bankruptcy.

The second event happened just as I was facing the fact that I'd have to declare bankruptcy: I met Su—actually met her one Sunday at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Rockville MD where my colleague and friend was pastor. After I met her I got her number from my friend and called her for a date. Well, the rest as they say is history! My declaring bankruptcy because of my being deep in debt was, I must admit difficult, but Su was nothing but supportive. My credit was trashed for many years! But Su was supportive. Through it all we got married and she got not only me but my son, Jase, from Deb's and my marriage.

I was as deeply in love with Su as I was in debt! But, in those first few years we had some really tough disagreements. At times they were almost insurmountable arguments. Most of them I must confess had to do with child-rearing, discipline, and rules with regard to Jase. Usually, the arguments erupted because I was more lax with Jase than she thought I should be. Or I'd get upset

with what I thought were her too-strict actions with Jase. You see, in my mind—even though I loved Su so very much and was so happy that we were together—I was convinced that she didn't love Jase as much as I did because she didn't give birth to him. I never confessed that to her then but that's what I thought when I was really honest with myself.

Well, one day we'd had a really nasty argument over her discipline of Jase about something or other Jase had done. I was furious! The next morning I was still fuming. Su had gone to work and Jase to school, while I had a late morning class at the university. so was still home actually making the bed while fuming about our disagreement. I shook the top sheet with extra vigor commensurate with my fury so that it actually snapped. And then, like a bolt of lightning it snapped with me: Even if Su had given birth to Jase from own womb and nursed him from her own body, we would still be having this identical argument and I'd be here right now fuming. Our disagreement had nothing to do with how much she did or did not love Jase. It had everything to do with our different—at times conflicting—parenting styles.

In that moment I realized another kind of my own bankruptcy—I owed Su. I was deeply in debt to her, not only to love her, but to let her be mother to my son; let her love him in her way—not mine. I realized that, up to that point, I had withheld a deep part of my love from her. I needed to trust her love and love her for how different it was from mine.

The profound coupling by Paul of a metaphor of debt with love for one another, brought the memory of 1984 crashing home again. “Owe no one anything except to love one another.” We can toss that phrase, “love one another,” around so carelessly and loosely that it almost becomes banal or empty. But I think that Paul is doubling down on how transforming genuine love for one another actually is. It's like he's saying, “You've got to get what the good news of God really means: it has torn down barriers between Jews and Greeks males and females slaves and free; it needs to tear down your barriers too. It is

going to cost you!! When you look at your brother or sister I don't care how different they are from you. I don't care what your arguments and disagreements are. You must realize that you are deep in debt to them: you OWE THEM your love." Oh, it's easy to love one another when we're all in agreement! But here's where the rubber hits the road: when we're going through conflict; when we're furious with one another, what will it take for us to realize that we are deeply in debt to one another? What will it take to challenge ourselves that they do love as much as we do. They do care just as much as we do. They are just approaching it differently; seeing it differently?

That kind of love hurts. That kind of love humbles! But I think that's what Jesus is driving at in the Gospel lesson. He never defines what "when someone sins against you" really means. I think it's in the eye of the beholder! I can recall many instances when I think the other guy in the church is the one who sinned against me—certainly I'm not in the wrong! So, I hear Jesus saying, "Hey it doesn't matter what someone has done; what matters is that you think someone's sinned against you." And it causes a rupture in the relationship, a betrayal of trust, a wound that hurts. But Jesus compels us when we've been sinned against to try everything possible to be reconciled. Keep going back. Take the first step toward forgiveness. And, listen, if it means bringing the whole church do whatever it takes to seek reconciliation. Treat that person like you are deeply in debt to love them. After Jesus says this Peter actually wonders if Jesus realizes what he's talking about: five verses later Peter asks, "Wait when someone in the church sins against me is it enough to forgive them seven times (remember 7 is a symbol of perfection in the Bible). Jesus replies, "Really? Not just seven times, but seventy-seven;" in other words so many times that you lose count!

Seeing our relationships with one another as being deeply in debt to their love for Christ and others, and deep in debt to them as one in the body of Christ is truly difficult, but it is transforming. It transforms how we will engage this

partisan political campaign season as Christians not democrats or republicans. It transforms how we value one another. It transforms how we judge those with whom we disagree whether it's in the church or on the streets. It transforms how we see Christ. For where two or three come together—really come together in a spirit of reconciliation from hurts and wrongs—ours eyes will be open and we will realize indeed that Christ is in our midst.

Amen.

Rev. Douglas Griffin

Interim Pastor

The Lessons

First Lesson – Romans 13:8-14

Introduction: : Today's first lesson picks up on two themes just before it. The first we read last week in which Paul urged Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus to let love be genuine—really labor together for good despite our differences. The second was about paying one's taxes, debts, and dues that concluded with verse 7: "Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Then begins our reading for today.

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.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.

Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Second Lesson – Matthew 18:15-20

Introduction: : Matthew 18 is the fourth of five teaching sections, which biblical scholars have long recognized as Matthew's central focus of his church comprised mainly of Jewish followers of Jesus. Just like Moses, through the five books of Moses, shows Jews the way to walk in the way of God and in love with one another, so too does Jesus in his five teaching discourses. In this section Jesus focuses on how important being a community of love and peace is, how important forgiving one another and seeking reconciliation in conflict is for being genuine followers of Jesus. Saying the words is not enough. Believing is not enough. Doing the deeds of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation is the way of heaven and shows the presence of Christ in our midst.

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”