

TEXT: Romans 13:8-14  
THEME: Whoever loves the other fulfills the law  
SUBJECT: Love  
TITLE: As

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
06 September 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for whoever loves the other fulfills the law. Every commandment is summed up in this saying: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does not work evil against the neighbor; hence love is the full totality of the Law. (Romans 13:8-10, David Bentley Hart's translation)

Psychiatrist and survivor of Auschwitz, Victor Frankl, wrote, "A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth . . . that love is the ultimate and the highest good to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love."

George Mackay Brown wrote a short story, 'Brig o' Dread,' that begins with a man apparently lost somewhere on fog-laden uplands. He looks out on to a desolate landscape with no signposts in sight, no clues about which direction to take. Meanwhile, his memory is working overtime as he stumbles through the fog—memories of things that have gone wrong in his life.

As the story unfolds, it is subtly made clear that this man is dead, and he doesn't know where he's going because he can't yet tell a story about his life that makes sense and moves towards reconciliation and homecoming. He discovers that he must bring to the surface memories that are profoundly hurtful and humiliating, not only the comfortable self-images he has been nurturing, and he must rehearse the truth of these until the story begins to take fresh shape.

The reader begins to grasp that what the man has to do is to allow something *new* into that story, some moment of hope or love or reconciliation which he can't generate for himself.

At the end of the story, a corner of fog begins to lift; the lights of an inhabited house appear in the landscape, though the labor continues. There might, after all, be a place to live but until something new comes in to change the story, he is trapped, stuck with the story he has been telling himself.

George Mackay Brown was a Roman Catholic. This short story is set in purgatory. Whatever our view of purgatory in traditional doctrinal terms, the truth is that we all inhabit purgatories of one sort or another when we feel stuck in stories with no apparent way out.

Jane Sibery's song, "The Gospel According to Darkness," has the refrain:

I see you lookin' around at the people on the street  
well, things aren't what they seem.  
If you push them hard enough  
you'll find that most of them do not feel worthy of love.  
Now how did this come to be?

Feelings of unworthiness arise in surprising places. Born into wealth and privilege, daughter of loving parents, brilliant, exceeding her peers in academic achievements, S. was obsessed with feelings of unworthiness. "One might think that there are souls who are irremediably ineligible for the service of God on account of the inadequacy of their nature. I among them."

It is hard to love our neighbor as ourselves when we don't love ourselves. It is very hard to "cast away the deeds of darkness and put on the armaments of light" (Ro 8:12) when we are lost in a painful and poignant sense of unworthiness.

We come to know ourselves in relation to others. The help we need to make sense of our lives, to inhabit a story that is life-giving, comes from others, people who live or who have lived luminous lives, lives that open up perspectives and horizons that are unpredictable and enriching. These people are sometimes flawed and compromised, but they are people who let the light through.

Paul, the author of Romans, is such a luminary. He was a passionate man, powerfully, even overwhelmingly so. Impressive in some ways and sometimes, on the basis of his letters, manipulative and possessive. When his anger ran away with him he could be seriously abusive towards his enemies (Gal 5:12 "Would that they who are causing you agitation might just castrate themselves!").

Even when his anger wasn't running away with him, he could be fairly fierce. Beginning a chapter in his letter to the Galatians (3:1) with the words "You idiots" is perhaps not the best way of getting the sympathy of his readers. But that forcefulness, that passion, is also shown as he expresses his fury at the way in which people he loved were being manipulated or mistreated by others.

Paul lists the abusive activities of some of his rivals (2 Cor 11:20-21), and says, in effect, with massive sarcasm, "Would you like me to treat you like that?" Underneath the passion and the anger and the occasional manipulative or savage moment, you sense the profound instinctive generosity of the man who declares, "Do you think I do this because I don't love you? God knows I do!" (2 Cor 11:11).

Paul had to be blinded by a great light before he could see a way out of his story. He was an accomplice to the murder of Stephen. He called himself the chief of sinners. Talk about feelings of unworthiness. He was a man of deep emotions.

Out of all that passion and that sense of living among anguished contradictions, arose, not a perfect person but a deeply, thoroughly human being fully engaged with the realities of his day and open to the wisdom of God. In his thinking and writing he let the light in. His great hymn to love has enlightened countless souls.

“If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of the angels, but do not have love, I have become resounding brass and a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecy and know all the mysteries and all the knowledge, and if I have all faith, of such a sort as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I distribute all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may be burned, and do not have love, I am profited nothing.

“Love is magnanimous, love is kind, is not envious, love does not boast, does not bluster, does not act in an unseemly fashion, does not seek for things of its own, is not irascible, does not take account of the evil deed, does not rejoice in injustice, but rejoices with the truth; it tolerates all things, has faith in all things, hopes in all things, endures all things. Love never fails . . .”

The love that never fails will not leave you trapped in the story you tell yourself about yourself. You are more than you ever thought, the world is more than you ever thought, God is more than you could begin to think.

Presently “we see by way of a mirror, in an enigma (in a fog), but then face to face; as yet I know partially, but then I shall know fully, *just as I am fully known.*” I shall know myself as I am fully known by God—who is love! I will see Love face to face and in Love’s light know myself as the beloved.

“But now abide faith, hope, love—these three—and the greatest of these is love.”

(This sermon is indebted to the work of Rowan Williams, who, of course, is not responsible for what I have done with his work.)

PRAYER: George Herbert—meditating on this poem/prayer will let the light in.

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked anything.

“A guest”, I answered, “worthy to be here.”  
    Love said, “You shall be he.”  
“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.”  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    “Who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.”  
“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”  
    “My dear, then I will serve.”  
“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”  
    So I did sit and eat.