

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 4, 2005
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 13:8-10
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51a
Second Lesson: Romans 13:1-10
Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Live With One Ongoing Debt

Debt-Free Living—I think that is the name of a book that I have got on a shelf at home some place. Of course if you walk into a book store—Barnes & Noble—and start looking at a personal finance section, you are going to find a lot of books about how to get out of debt and how to stay out of debt and things like that, aren't you? Start paying attention to commercials on television and see how many of them offer to give you a loan so you can consolidate all of your debts and thereby supposedly get out of debt sooner or faster. All of our life we are kind of taught that we shouldn't let debt get out of control and yet, at times, it still does.

This morning our God reminds us to *let no debt remain outstanding*, pay all of those debts, fulfill the obligations that we have made, which is what we as a Christian would want to do to honor the God who has saved us. But then he reminds us this morning that there is an ongoing debt that should always be outstanding in our lives. Not because we don't want to pay it, but because it is never completely paid. That no matter if we pay this debt to one person, another person is going to enter our life where the debt still remains outstanding. Because the debt he is talking about as he urges us to live with the one ongoing debt is the debt of love. What he is reminding us of is that no matter how much love I show to you, there is going to be someone else that comes into my life or another opportunity the next day or later that day to show love to someone else. When you stop and think about it, you are never going to be able to say, "There, that's it. I'm done showing love to people. I've paid that off. Now I can go back to being a lousy, miserable jerk to people." It doesn't work that way.

It doesn't work that way in God's relationship to us, does it? God loved us with an incredible love in that he gave his one and only son to live in our place and die in our place so that we have eternal life, so that our sins are forgiven, so that we stand at one with God. But God didn't wipe his hands clean of us then and say, "That's it, I've loved them enough." He continues to show his love to us day after day with all the blessings he gives to us. Blessings that maybe we went through life just kind of taking for granted until we saw some of the coverage this week and see the people down south that don't have some of these blessings from God right now like food and shelter and clothing that you and I might get up and take for granted every day. God continues to pay this debt of love to us even though we don't deserve it and we haven't earned it. That's why we, as Christians, want to live with one ongoing debt—that debt of love.

And then our God reminds us also this morning that we have a sinful nature and at times that sinful nature is going to want to confuse exactly what love means. So God

gets very specific and tells us exactly what kind of love he is talking about and that he wants us to keep paying to one another.

I think the interesting thing about these words from Romans 13 that we are looking at is the context in which they are given. *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another* is spoken of in context to his Words about the government and the governing authorities that we read in our Second Lesson today. In that context, it becomes clear, and we can be very certain that he is not just talking about loving the way we are inclined to love today—loving those who have earned our love or deserved our love, loving those who love us back. Left on our own that is what we are going to do fairly often, isn't it? But when he connects this to "submit to the governing authorities" and then you recall that he is writing to the Christians that were living in Rome and the government in Rome, at this point in time when he wrote the letter, was not as openly hostile as it would be in a few short years, but it still viewed Christianity as just an outlaw religion—a break-off of the Jewish sect. It had no great love for Christians. In fact, Nero would come along shortly after this was written and its tradition holds that Paul was beheaded—Paul was killed under Nero. And we know about Nero and his view of Christians that came shortly after this letter was that he had a party one night and since they couldn't exactly string a set of plastic owls out in the back yard to light up the party, he impaled Christians on poles and lit them on fire to illuminate his party that evening.

In that kind of setting, when he says "submit to the governing authorities" and when he says "let no debt remain outstanding except the debt of love", we know he is talking about "love everyone" and in case we miss it he says "your fellow man here". Not just other Christians when he says love one another, but love your fellow man. Even those you don't like—love. This is a debt that we owe, a debt that we can never pay, a debt that when we show that kind of love to one person another person comes along as I said. But why? Why in the world would we want to love those that we don't like? It doesn't make sense.

There are a couple of reasons. One is that God loved us first. God loved us not just by speaking about it or talking about it, he loved by action. He sent his Son into the world. His Son was perfect. Where you and I have failed to love, he loved perfectly. And then his Son, Jesus, took all of our sins that we commit against this command of God and every other command of God and carried them to the cross where he took away the guilt and their control over us through his life and through his death. God loved us with these actions. And not only has he done that for the whole world, but then to us individually he sends the Holy Spirit through the Word or through the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to forgive our sins, to create that faith and then to strengthen that faith. The more we see what God has done for us, the love he has shown to us, the more we want to love others because it is how we say "thank you" to God for what he has done. We want to keep paying this outstanding debt because we know in reality as we love one another we are showing love to God who loved us first. That is why God said Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all die that those who die should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Secondly, why we want to show love to other people, even at times when it is not easy, even at times when it brings us difficulty or being uncomfortable, is because Christ died for those people also. So we want to show a specific kind of love to them. He died for them and he wants them to be saved so the love that we want to show first and foremost is always going to focus on their soul, their soul salvation. Yes, we will show love to one another in bodily needs, but our readings remind us this morning that the specific kind of love that God is very concerned about is love that has to do with leading others to Christ—both those that don't know Christ and those who have strayed from Christ. If you look at both our First Lesson and our Gospel today, they both deal with that kind of specific love, don't they? *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."* So to man if I say to you "warn that person" and you don't warn them, then you will be accountable for their blood. God has called us to this very specific kind of love to be concerned about the spiritual welfare of people around us.

We need this reminder. We need a clearly-defined definition from our God of exactly what the kind of love is that he wants us to show because our sinful nature is going to say, "You want me to go and tell someone else that what they are doing is wrong? Who am I to do that? They might not like me anymore. They might react and be mad at me and that won't be fun for me and it won't be easy for me. In fact, I think that is butting into someone else's business when it is not my business." It is interesting, isn't it, how our sinful nature works when it comes to talking to someone else about their relationship with God, up goes the flag "that's none of my business". But when it comes to sitting and having a cup of coffee with someone and talking about someone else's life and we're gossiping, where is our sinful nature saying "we are not supposed to do that" then? We have no problem talking about someone else's business at that time. Gossip seems to be easier for us than this love that God calls us to. Why is that? We are sinners. We have a sinful nature. Even though we know what Christ has done for us and we want to do what is right—we want to love God and love our neighbor perfectly—we aren't going to do it. That is why God has to clearly define it with don't murder, don't covet, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't do all of these things that he lists out for us, because our sinful nature is going to come up with the idea that "if it makes me happy, it must be good and loving. That sex outside of marriage must be a good idea, because I enjoy it and it brings us closer together. God wants us to be close, doesn't he?"

Our sinful nature can turn God's commands upside down so that we think something is loving that God has said, "This is sin." That is why God has to clearly define it. And that is why God calls us to love one another by calling one another to repentance, because we are going to sin. We are going to do things that are just foolish. But when we see someone else do it we say, "Boy, how could they do that?" But in our mind we have all these reasons why it is okay for us and in this position for us to do what God clearly says is wrong. Our sinful nature will convince us that it is okay for us to do it. That's why I need you as my brothers and sisters in Christ to come to me and say, "You are wrong. You are sinning. And that sin is going to separate you from God, and I don't want you to be separated from God." That is why we need each other to do that for us as love—not as "why can't you be more like me"—but as love because we are concerned for the spiritual welfare of one another.

Sometimes it is easy to see how we can act in love. After you have watched the news reports this week and you see all the things that have gone on in those southern coastal states and you see all the different collections that are being made, you can say, "That's a way that I can show love." And that is very clear. And that is a very good and godly thing that we can do as a way of showing our love for our Savior, by showing love for people in their physical needs. But sometimes it's not as easy to see the spiritual need that each one of us has. That is not as obvious, but as Christians who love one another, we want to be attuned to this truth—that we need to share the love of God with each other—which at times means the law—so that we can share the sweetness of the Gospel. Because if there is one thing that this last week should have taught us with this hurricane is that this is not our eternal home. Things here can be here today and gone tomorrow in an instant. But the one thing that lasts forever is our relationship with Jesus Christ—and that is what we want to work hard to strengthen—both our own and other people's relationship to Christ.

That is the debt that I owe you and you owe me and we owe everyone we meet. And because of God's love, it is a joy to carry out!