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Romans 13:8-14

A community Built on Love

In July of 1997 I spent a week with Mennonite Disaster Service cleaning up after the heavy flooding in Winnipeg that year. I remember tearing down flood damaged walls and emptying basements completely filled with water, and being somewhat overwhelmed by the damage that water can cause. But being there when I could seemed to me to be the Christian thing to do, the loving response. In light of that experience, I've been interested in the Christian response to the huge humanitarian disaster of Hurricane Harvey in Texas. How do Christians respond to their neighbours in the midst of catastrophe? There has been a lot of media coverage of the apparent lack of immediate response from televangelist Joel Osteen and Lakewood church - a church located in Houston and by some counts the largest church in the United States. A church that promotes a prosperity gospel that good things come to those who are Christian has had trouble with the needs of this disaster. But the media and social media criticism of Joel Osteen masks the many smaller churches in Houston that opened their doors to flood victims and the recovery efforts of Christians that are just beginning. Mennonite Disaster Service, MDS, has sent some initial volunteers into the area for assessment and the beginnings of clean up. MDS will stay for the long haul, helping not only with initial clean up but also with the long term rebuild. In fact, Christian response to natural disaster is consistently higher than the average. It seems to be a way that Christians express their faith. I would say that it is a way of expressing love.

When Paul wrote to the churches of Rome he was writing to a community divided. There was significant conflict between those who insisted on conformity to various Jewish laws, particularly in relation to food, and those who felt these laws were unimportant in the light of Christ. Paul's letters show us that conflicts within churches are not unique to the 20th and 21st centuries but were prevalent already from the beginning. Part of the purpose of Romans was to address these conflicts. Paul's approach is to appeal to love.

“Owe no one anything, except to **love** one another; for the one who **loves** another has fulfilled the law” One of the challenges of speaking about love is that love can mean so many different things in our society. Is it that feeling of passion between two people at the beginning

of a romantic relationship? Is it that warm, nurturing feeling that we often feel for our children? Is it the experienced love of a marriage of many years where two people know all of their partner's foibles and the love is deep? Is it the love of two long time friends who have been through a lot together?

It seems to me that the love that Romans is talking is not really a feeling at all, but more a way of relating to others. An active thing. The tag line at the Mennonite Church USA meetings a couple of months ago was "Love is a verb." I presume the intention of this was to differentiate different kinds of love and name clearly that Christian love is not preponderantly a feeling but is about action - Doing love. "Love is a verb."

Paul says that the commandments are summed up by this phrase: "Love your neighbour as yourself." This doesn't mean having strong feelings of love toward your neighbour. It means acting in loving ways. It means "doing no wrong to a neighbour" - in Paul's words - fulfilling the law. Paul is speaking to a community of believers who are struggling with conflict. Sometimes that is the toughest time to act love. When you are in conflict with those close to you. Feelings run high. Disagreements become personal. Churches in conflict struggle with this active love. I know there have been times when I have. And conflict is part of any human community. There **will** be church conflict. And acknowledging this, Paul writes that active doing love is the core of the Christian community. This doesn't mean that we will always like each other or get along. It does mean that we will act love anyway. Love one another. Love your neighbour as yourself. Do love. This is what the Christian community is built on.

If it is, then that active love also spills out beyond the church. It spills out in providing shelter to flood victims and helping them rebuild. It shines through in active rejection of racism as we saw in protests a few weeks ago. It spills out into work with refugees. It is evident in our work with welcome wednesday, where food is provided and community is built. It is clear in our participation with Jewish and Muslim groups in the interfaith peace camp. A community built on love - on active, engaged, doing love - also pours that love into the world.

Today is Christian Formation Sunday and we are beginning the Sunday school year. There is energy and excitement and passion. After what often seems like a summer break, we are here reenergized for the work of the church. As we enter this new year I invite us to love one another. Not a sappy kind of love. Not romantic or even friendly love. Rather I invite us to love one another with hard working love, love that wishes good for the other and works for it. Love

that creates safety as our safe church pledge is intended to. Active love. Love that does, within and outside of the community. Love is a verb. Let's do it. AMEN.