

The Power of love in human relationships – Romans 13:8-14

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Can any of you remember where you were on 19th May 2018? Can any of you recall the powerful words of Bishop Micheal Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, who preached at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle?

Allow me to refresh your memory. He quoted the late Dr. Martin Luther King who once said “we must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love, and when we do that we will make of this old world a new world. For love is the only way.”

Bishop Curry continued with these words:

There’s power in love. Don’t underestimate it. Don’t even oversentimentalize it. There’s power, power in love. We were made by a power of love. And our lives were meant and are meant to be lived in that love. That’s why we are here. Ultimately the source of love is God himself, the source of all of our lives. There’s an old medieval poem that says, “where true love is found, God himself is there.”

Friends, in the New Testament the Apostle John in his first letter puts it this way “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7-8 NLT).

In today’s 2nd reading, we find the Apostle Paul also touching on the great theme of love, a theme he develops further in 1 Corinthians 13. In the Romans passage today, St Paul reminds us that love is the basic virtue that informs, guides and fulfills God’s commandments.

Verses 8 and 10 says “If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.

Jesus of Nazareth on one occasion was asked by a lawyer to sum up the essence of the teachings of Moses. He went back and reached back into the Hebrew scriptures, to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and Jesus said you shall love the lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. And then in Matthew’s version, he added, he said, on these two Love of God and Love of Neighbor, hang all the law, all the prophets, everything that Moses wrote, everything in the holy prophets, everything in the scriptures, everything that God has been trying to tell the world. Beloved – love fulfills the Law.

You see, love must always be the motivating factor. For we must not be so rigid in our attempts to follow the letter of the law, that we neglect the Spirit of the law. Jesus had powerful words of rebuke for the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who he called hypocrites. He rebuked them for laying heavy burdens on God’s people without showing mercy and compassion and love.

They saw themselves as superior to others and they prided themselves on their intellectual knowledge. Their zeal for fulfilling God's Law was misguided. Their words and actions were not motivated by love. All they focused on was the Law and that was all that came out of their mouths.

In John's Gospel, Jesus had this to say to them "because I know you don't have God's love within you."

How could Jesus make this statement? I believe it is because Jesus, being God's Son, knew what was in their hearts. Also, their words, actions and behavior revealed a lack of God's love. Jesus said that you will know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-20).

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals with love in Ch 13 and he has this to say about knowledge: If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.

Unfortunately, there are some in this world whose zeal for the law is also misguided and they rigidly focus on the letter of the law. They pride themselves on their knowledge and intellectual abilities that they neglect the Spirit of the law – which is love, grace, mercy and compassion. In their dealings with others, they do not reflect the love of God in how they speak to others and they end up doing harm to others.

In the Romans passage today, the debt that Paul speaks of seems to signify a constant search and growth toward holistic love. However, growing into love is hampered when we treat each other poorly.

As one biblical scholar puts it "the mission of God and the mission of the church must be baptized in compassionate love for others."

The Romans passage today ends with "Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires. Last week Fr. John helped us realize that taking up our cross is denying our own desires. To deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ means that we are willing to let go of our self-created programmes for happiness. Jesus is the fullest expression of God's love. This love is the ground on which Jesus operated throughout his ministry and in the resurrection. While hate destroys persons, societies and communities alike, love attracts and allows people to respond in kind ways. Friends, this seems to be the core of Paul's message in Romans 13 v 8-10: love has the power to build a community and to transform people's lives in ways consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If love does not dictate the way people treat each other, the human family will slide into the darkness that Paul talks about in Romans 13:12-13. This imagery of darkness is already part of the world and also the church. We see the manifestations of it in violence against women and children, lack of respect and tolerance of others, defiance of laws that are meant to protect and nurture, blatant corruption and greed, racism, sexism and the list is endless.

Yet, we have hope and our hope is found in Jesus who is the light of the world – a light which the forces of darkness cannot put out. Jesus, our Saviour, the Son of the Living God is the fullest expression of God who is love.

I conclude as I started – with words from Bishop Curry's sermon. God is love. There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live. May we love as Christ has taught us to love.

May our hearts be filled with this love as we clothe ourselves with Christ. May God Bless you. AMEN.