

Sermon: *Wanderer, Worshipper, Lover of Leaving*

Scripture: Romans 13: 8-10

Date: 9/6/2026

Romans 13: 8-10 (NRSV)

8. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9. 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." 10. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Rumi – 13th century Sufi mystic and poet

Come, come, whoever you are
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow
a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.

I'm going to pair today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans with a favorite poem of mine by the 13th century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi. Rumi's poem appears to pick up beautifully where Paul's message leaves off and hopefully you will see why as we go on. Please listen again to the passage from Romans and the poem from Rumi.

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This brief passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans is part of today's assigned lectionary reading and very succinctly captures the heart of Paul's take on what is required of us as followers of Jesus. Just a note of historical context: most of the early churches at the time when Paul was writing were composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and there was often friction between these two factions. Paul seems to be trying to maintain some foothold in Jewish law

and yet accommodate any Gentile resistance to the sheer volume and demands of Jewish law. In the first two sentences, Paul appears to deliver a deceptively simple concession. He tells his audience, you don't have to follow all these individual laws. You only have to follow one: to love one another, to love your neighbor as yourself. Any relief his audience might have felt quickly disappears when one considers the implications of what it means to follow this one commandment: love does no wrong to your neighbor. None? Ever? We know how familiar Paul is with the human propensity for sin. Earlier in Romans, he bemoans his own sinful nature: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." He seems to imply that he, and therefore we, have no agency. If we have no agency over our behavior, how are we to fulfill this one commandment - to do no wrong to our neighbor?

Embedded in this passage are three words and we could spend hours discussing each one of them: what it means to owe, what it means to love, and who is our neighbor?

I am not going to say much today about who our neighbor is, although that is a hot topic in today's political and cultural climate. I will just say that I interpret Paul literally – we are one another. I, and each of you individually, are one, and everybody else is another, or in other words anybody who is not me is my neighbor, and therefore we are called to love ourselves and everybody else. That alone is a tall order. I will only add that I also believe that however you define neighbor, the boundaries you place on your concept of neighbor are directly proportionate to the boundaries you place around your concept of love.

But it is love and the obligation of love that I want to talk about today.

I keep a daily journal and it is my practice when I write one of these sermons to go back and review what I have written over the past year to see if there are any threads or thoughts that I might apply to the text that I have chosen. So, per my custom I went back all the way to January.

As some of you may know, I have been retired for just over a year, and so this past year has been a year of transition and change, and not unexpectedly this is reflected in my journal. I knew at least a year in advance when I would be retiring, and I felt that I had taken appropriate steps to prepare for this next phase of my life. It wasn't all figured out. I knew it would be an adjustment. I knew there would be challenges ahead. But I talked to people, I did research, I made multiple to do lists, and I had already started to do some of the things I had looked forward to doing when I had more free time. But I also wanted to leave space for what might develop so I intentionally didn't overcrowd my daily schedule too much. I felt I was good to go.

But there were two things I had not anticipated. First, I did not anticipate all that I would feel this past year. Yes, I anticipated worry, and anxiety, and even fear. All of those came up in

predictable and manageable doses. But the overriding feeling I experienced was that of drifting. I felt untethered. Now we use the word tether a lot in worship so it is not uncommon for me to hear it here. I take it to mean this invisible, unbreakable bond of love that binds us to God. The generic definition of tether means to bind one thing or being to another. The primary requirement is that you need two end points. Otherwise, all you have is a piece of rope flapping in the wind. And perhaps I felt a bit like a piece of rope flapping in the wind.

And the second thing I did not anticipate was how I naively seemed to assume that all the changes in my life were happening in a vacuum. I did not give much thought to the fact that life would go on around me and there might also be significant changes in my family, among my friends, and in the world at large. And there were. I found this overwhelming at times.

So back to my journal. In January I found 2 entries that caught my attention. I must have heard or read something about replacing a new year's resolution, which I tend not to make anyway, with a question or questions for the year ahead. And I had written just after Epiphany: these are my questions for the year: how do I love and how am I loved? What is God calling me to in this next season of my life; who is God calling me to be? I don't remember writing this. But I must have followed through on it because in the new year when I started a daily meditation and prayer practice, I found myself asking those questions.

That same week that I had written those questions, I had two rather bizarre experiences. I walk most days on the Arlington bike path. Now I am a creature of habit. I walk the same route every day, and I stop and sit on the same bench every day. In fact, I sit in the same spot on the same bench every day. One day that week I got up from the bench to return home and when I came to my street rather than turn left to go back to my apartment, my body turned right. I walked up to Mass Ave, turned left, walking all the way to Whole Foods, stood outside wondering if I needed anything and then realized I had no money with me, and then I walked back past the library, behind the Unitarian Church and through the historical cemetery and finally up Pleasant Street to home. And the funny thing is this happened again two days later only in Winchester. I moved to Arlington almost 20 years ago so when I do come to Winchester these days it most likely just to come to church. As I left the church, I found myself walking past my car and into Winchester center where I proceeded to wander up and down the streets, looking in windows until I finally found myself back at my car and I then drove home. I found these two walkabouts rather unsettling. Do I need to see someone about this?

And then in March I heard an interview with Rabbi Shai (Shy) Held who has written a book entitled, "Judaism is About Love." His goal in writing this book was to restore the theological

tradition of love in American Judaism that he felt has been lost over the years for a variety of reasons, resulting in an emphasis more on law and ethics than love.

In listening to this interview, there were two things which stood out for me. First, were all the words there are in Hebrew for love: there's a word for abundant love, and for abiding love and for commitment and for love and worship. By comparison, our little four-letter word – L-O-V-E – seemed inadequate. And trivialized in our culture to the point where we often use the short hand of a little red heart emoji. But beyond the Hebrew words for love, there were also a wide assortment of ways of describing love. Rilke called it hard work, Kierkegaard said it was the task beyond all tasks. It's an emotion, it's both an emotion and action combined, it's a practice, it's a force or an energy. It's a mystery beyond all definition. Whatever it was it was too vast to be contained by any one definition. But the one definition that was offered up that I preferred, especially since it seemed to match my own recent experience with meditation and prayer, was love as an orientation. As Rabbi Held said, love is not the thing itself but the orientation to the thing, as if we are directing our bodies, our minds, our hearts and all of our senses in the direction of love.

The second thing that resonated with me was Rabbi Held's belief in the theory of possibilism. It is the theory that we as humans have agency, the thing that I felt was missing from Paul's commentary; that there are external constraints within our environment that we can choose to adapt to, attempt to change or modify, or overcome but that ultimately, we are responsible for how society develops. Applying this theory to his faith, Rabbi Held described the world we live in as a huge chasm between wonder and horror, and that this belief in possibilism allows us, and in fact requires us, "to celebrate the wonder and to do something about the horror." This belief in our own agency means we have the capacity to love more and therein lies the hope; the hope, quite frankly that I did not feel after reading this passage from Paul. It doesn't mean that we won't fail at this one commandment to love one another. We will. Often. Repeatedly.

And this brings us to the word owe or obligation. To owe or be obligated to another person is to be bound to that person. Just as we are bound to God in love, we are called to replicate that in our binding to each other. Just as we are tethered to God, we are called to be tethered to our neighbor. But because we are human and have this free will or agency, we can choose to turn away from God and from each other. But that same free will and agency makes it equally possible for us to turn back towards God and each other. Our forgiving God is forever at the end of that tether, welcoming us back each and every time. And we are called to forgive each other as well – this forgiving is also part of doing no wrong. Even though the Rumi poem does not mention forgiveness, it is, I believe, implicit in those last three lines.

When we wander, and we will, we will know that God is always at the end of that tether, and there is always a way home.

So –

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Amen.