

“The Law of Love” / Romans 13:8-14 / 7 September 2014

“The one who loves another has fulfilled the law,” the Apostle Paul tells the church in Rome. “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Now wait a minute, let me get this straight. All those rules back in Leviticus and Numbers, all the elaborate ceremonies for getting rid of sin, the animal sacrifices, the literal scape goats on whose horns the priest wrote the sins of the people before chasing the animal off into the desert, all ten commandments, not to mention the extra ones that most people never know about because they don't read the fine print, all the legal codes of all the civilizations from Hammurabi right up to our own day of courtroom dramas like “The Good Wife”—all these complex labyrinths of legality can be reduced to one single rule: love your neighbor? You mean to tell me that schools of law, and attorneys, and those many law firms that advertize on refrigerator magnets—these things all exist merely because some people fail to love their neighbors? Why do we need laws, and rules, and commandments if the only regulation is “Love thy neighbor?” Well, depending on who your neighbor is, it might be easier to keep every law in every leatherbound volume on Edgar Snyder's shelf than to love him or her. Rules are for beginners. Loving people...that's hard.

Historic old sates like Pennsylvania still have a lot of strange laws that linger on the books, and no one bothers to strike them despite the fact that they've outlived their usefulness. Technically, anyone driving a motor vehicle is still required by law to pull off the road and allow horse-drawn vehicles to pass. The same law also requires that you throw a blanket over your car so that the horses won't get spooked. Of course, we've never seen that law enforced. One of the few remaining blue laws here in the Keystone State forbids the sale of vehicles on a Sunday. This rule applies not only to the big dealerships but also to folks like my father-in-law, who always has a broken down jalopy for sale in his front yard. If you happen to have political ambitions, be careful how you defend your honor: You're not allowed to run for governor if you've ever participated in a duel. And all those those temporary fireworks stores that they pop up in the parking lot at Rite Aid just before the Fourth of July? Under state law, you can only buy fireworks there if you're an out of state resident. If you're a renter, it's against the law for you to sing in the bathtub. If you own your home, well, then it's okay.

You can still see the old Quaker influence in a lot of the sate laws surrounding matrimony. Here in Pennsylvania, you can choose to eliminate the middleman—that's to say, the clergyman—at your wedding ceremony. The county can issue you a “do-it-yourself” marriage license. All it takes is a handshake, a promise, and two signatures. In fact, if you plan to show up drunk to your own wedding, then you'd better do it yourself because the state can issue me a fine for officiating at a wedding where either bride or groom appears to be drunk. And if even a do-it-yourself wedding is a little too elaborate for your tastes, that's okay. Under Pennsylvania law, a marriage is valid as long as two adults own property together and declare themselves “married.” Simple as that.

Oh, the rules that are meant to make us safe! The laws that are supposed to protect the greater good and foster well-being for all! Everyone knows that in New Jersey, it's against the law to pump your own gas. But it's also illegal to make faces at a police officer, or to pass another vehicle without first honking your horn. Adultery is still a prosecutable offense in New York State. And flirting can earn you a fine of \$25—the prudes! Many laws were necessary in their day, perhaps like the law still on the book sin Maine requiring men to carry muskets to church in case of Indian attacks during worship. But like all things human, laws are subject to the vicissitudes of time, to culture, and the long evolution of the human conscience. Many laws that seemed obvious and necessary end up outliving their usefulness. But one law abides forever, and that law is love.

The Apostle Paul and I have had a stormy relationship down through the years. At his best, he's the most moving, erudite, poetic writer in the New Testament. In terms of pure beauty, what poetry can match the famous “Love Chapter” of First Corinthians 13, or the soul-stirring lyrics of Romans 8? And it's not just fluff, either. It's meaningful and inspiring. At his worst, though, Paul can be pretty hard to take. Paul's ego could be unbearable. “Try to be like me,” he used to tell his followers, “as I try to be

like Christ.” He could be a bit of a performer, and he really knew how to lay down the guilt and self-pity. He was a man of very strong opinions, a “my way or the highway” kind of guy. And yet, despite all of that, consider his wise words in Romans 13; they're neither poetic nor irksome, but profoundly insightful. It can take a lifetime to really learn the lesson that Paul is teaching us here, for we all want to believe that each and every domain of life comes with a neat little set of instructions just to keep us safe. But in reality, we would be wrong. “There is no law for those who live in love, for the one who loves his or her neighbor has fulfilled the law.”

Now we all know that fully one tenth of the Bible is made up of rules, and prescriptions, and proscriptions, and laws of every kind. In Leviticus, it's deemed a sin to wear cotton with wool or to mix meat with dairy. No polyester slacks. No ham and cheese sandwiches! No Philly cheesesteaks, either. There are laws about how you're supposed to dress, and cut your hair, and maintain your personal hygiene. There are laws governing which kinds of animals had to be sacrificed for which sins. The Bible is loaded down with ancient laws—some of which we keep and others we dismiss as part of our spiritual heritage, but no longer binding. And yet, Paul seems to be saying here in Romans that in former times, people needed all kinds of detailed laws, for the social moral compass was still relatively unevolved. He's basically saying, “Look how late it is in the life of the world. You know what time it is. The night is far gone. The day is near. If you just loved each other, you wouldn't need all these complex rules to keep you from harming one another. The law is love. If you can get that, if you can finally, finally get that, then all the other rules fall into line.” In other words, the many detailed laws were for a darker age. Now the law is love, and we know exactly how that law is kept.

Or do we? I mean...I think we do. Most of the time. Er, it's simple, right? Love. What could be more obvious. Loving people is...easy. Except when it's not. The Apostle Paul is restating the words of Jesus here, and Jesus famously told us to love our neighbors and our enemies—presumably because they're the selfsame folks for most of us. Sometimes the old laws are easier to keep than the one new one. Moses told us not to kill our neighbor. Jesus told us to love our neighbor. When my neighbor lets his two dogs run off the leash, and they come bounding into my yard to chase my daughters, I'm siding with Moses...and even that's a stretch. It's nice to be freed of the many cumbersome laws that make up so much of the sacred book. And truly, we are freed from them. The life and words of Jesus outweigh Paul and Moses and the prophets and apostles. They're wiser and more useful than other parts of the book. Some people of faith will argue that all parts of the Bible are equal and must be equally obeyed, but even the people who say such things can't do them. If anyone tells you that the whole Bible is still binding in the life of a Christian, then ask them why their parents didn't have them stoned to death when they were disobedient teens. It's the law in Leviticus. I'll tell you why, it's because the law of love makes a whole lot more sense. No parent would choose to put that old stoning rule into practice, for love extends to the disobedient child just as much as it does to the obedient one. Yes, the law of love makes so much better sense than all these dusty old rules that have collected like fallen leaves on the forest floor of our sacred texts. And yet, if people choose outdated legal codes of past millennia over love—if they choose to reject others on the basis of ancient rules: gays, or people of other faiths, or sinners—then surely it's because they know in their hearts that love is just so blamed hard.

Look at the kind of religion that is tearing our world apart today. It's a kind of faith that's preoccupied with every law except the law of love. I daresay, the more laws your faith has, the more primitive it is. Rules are for spiritual toddlers, for people who have not yet mastered the greater concept of love. But the old laws remain on the books because the best of them still show us what love looks like—until that day when we have enough love in our hearts that we can recognize it on our own. It's true, too, that you have to learn the finer details before you can get to the bigger concepts: Don't steal or lie are concrete elements of love that a child has to learn first; otherwise love is too abstract and lofty. Any musician will tell you that you have to be able to play the notes on the page before you can make good musical improvisation. You have to learn your stilted, textbook French before you can have

a heated and expletive-filled argument with your Congolese cab driver in Paris. But in the end, real love is harder than rule-keeping, just like improv music is harder than playing by the book, and just as real conversation is harder than textbook talk. Love is harder than rules.

This is the law we live by now: love. It means pursuing relationship with people we don't like. It means being in real dialogue with people who disagree with us. It means scraping together whatever patience we've got and trying harder to understand another. It means putting aside our pride and ignoring a slight or an insult. This is love. It persists in its never-ending attempt to see oneself in the other. This is the only rule you've got for life, the only one! "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Now, putting aside all the other laws, how are you going to live your life with this one? Amen.