

The playwright George Bernard Shaw sat next to a pompous bore at a dinner party one evening. After listening to an interminable monologue of useless information, Shaw observed, "Between the 2 of us we know all there is to know." "How's that?" asked his fascinated companion. "Well," replied Shaw, "you seem to know everything except that you are an interminable bore." And I know that!"

Shaw and Winston Churchill famously found each other to be difficult. Shaw once sent 2 tickets to Churchill to the opening night of one of his plays, with instructions to "bring a friend – if you have one." Churchill sent them back because he was busy opening night. He said he would come on "the second night – if there is one."

We all have difficult people in our life, and it is a challenge to love them. But Jesus is clear: "Owe no debt to anyone except the debt to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Rom 13:8)

If we read the New Testament with a bit of a critical eye, easily a third of Paul's letters are written to divided, disunited congregations. Church division doesn't seem to be major interest of his Letter to the Romans – probably because Paul had never met them when he wrote it! But this Sunday's second reading from Romans, opens with talk of the "obligation to love each other." The reality is that pastors don't urge their congregations to love each other, to get along with each other, unless the congregation is having trouble with love. Right?

There are a lot of beautiful and lofty passages in Romans, but here Paul is the teaching pastor, teaching First Church Rome what it means to be those who, having been loved by Christ, now must put this into practice, into real life. Having experienced the love of God as manifested in the cross of Christ, we are to deal with each other as we have been dealt with by God.

To owe nothing but love to another is to own the reality that we all are completely dependent on God's grace for not only our forgiveness, but for our very existence, and it reframes how we live in relation to each other in our everyday interactions. It reframes it in such a way that other obligations become significantly less than they once were. We owe each other nothing; but in love, we owe each other everything. Paul even says that love "fulfills the law" (V. 10). Love is superior to law according to St. Paul. Fulfilling the Law means loving each other, rather than being obligated to perform the law and thereby draw lines of distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, debtor and benefactor, sinner and saint, gay and straight.

In one verse, Paul overturns many of the foundational assumptions of much of religion. We are now obligated to others because we are obligated to Christ. We owe everyone love even as everyone has been loved by Christ.

In a divisive age in which our country, when many congregations and even denominations are splintering and fragmenting, Paul's word is a reminder of our obligation to love each other as Christ has loved us. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2023, p. 33-34) Couple this with our gospel about reconciling within the church, and we have a lot to chew on, a lot to challenge us, a lot to learn.

OK, so that was a bit of background, so point 2. What about when people are unlovable and difficult? Paul says we must love them without conditions. No ifs, ands, or buts.

Apparently there were some problems in First Church Rome – a shortage of love in its midst. Maybe our congregation is not suffering from major contention or division right now. But the truth is, from the first, those who follow Christ have trouble with contentiousness and division. Why? Because people, even church people – especially church people?! – find it difficult to agree, be unified, and together on every issue. Yes. But I think a major reason why church life can be contentious and stressful is – JESUS!

Our church is not ours. Jesus sets the conditions, whereby we can be called a church and Jesus determines our mission. Furthermore, He determines who we will be Christian with. And as we see – from the first, the very first, we’ve had difficulty participating in Christ’s mission and being loving and united in the church.

Contentiousness in the congregation? Disagreements about the purpose and mission of the church? We live in a combative, often quarrelsome age -- where there are some deep political divides and sometimes those divisions are carried over into the church. But I’m wondering if some of the contentiousness and divisiveness we sometimes suffer is an expected spinoff of Jesus Christ’s wildly expansive notion of salvation. GOT THAT? Christ’s wildly EXPANSIVE notion of salvation. There was a wonderful book I read when I was on sabbatical over 10 years ago – suggested to me by the priest who directed my 30 day retreat. It was called YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL, and it was all about this notion that Christ came for the whole world – that means EVERYBODY – and Church folk are forever saying “Yes, but He doesn’t mean THOSE people” – and then name their particular category.

Third, Jesus is why we are here in the first place. We all need to always remember that. He has assembled us. We are here, not because we are all in agreement with one another but because Christ is determined to assemble, congregate, and gather a group of people who are to live in the world in His name. If we’ve got a savior who sets out to seek, find, and save the lost (Lk 19:10), who was criticized because of the company He kept at table, and commented, “If you are well, you don’t need a doctor; sick people do.” (Mt 9:12), we need to expect that sometimes there’ll be trouble among those gathered at the Lord’s table. Jesus says, in effect, “I’ve not come for good, respectable, Scripture-reading, justice-advocating, or hypersensitive-to-other-people’s wounds church people. I’ve come for sinners, only sinners.”

Or as Paul put it a few chapters earlier, to the contentious, disagreeing and disagreeable, combative, quarrelsome congregation at Rome, “You might be willing to die for a really, really good person but Christ shows His love for us in that He died only for sinners – only sinners.” (Rom 5:7, paraphrased)

Jesus got into all manner of trouble, not because He refused to be married, nor because of questions about His orthodoxy or biblical interpretation. The chief charge against Jesus was that He saved those whom no one thought could be saved, no one wanted saved. “This man welcomes sinners – and eats with them,” as Luke 15:2 reminds us.

Never once did Jesus command us to love the lovely, loveable, and loving. Never did He allow His disciples to waste time attempting to determine which sin was the worst or who to ban from being a disciple. All He did was to love. Particularly notable was His love for the unlovely, and unlovable and unloved. And then He turned around and commanded us to do the same.

Jesus’s determination to save sinners, only sinners, would be challenge enough for us sinners without Jesus’s equally determined insistence to put those trying-to-be-redeemed sinners in the church. That’s us, sinners one and all. No exceptions! Because of Jesus’s peculiar definition of salvation, we must be saved AS A GROUP. His ministry began with the formation of a bumbling band of 12 knuckleheads that we now call

disciples, even saints. Paul didn't go forth into the world asking Gentiles thoughtfully to consider his message and then come to a verdict upon the truth. Paul went about planting churches, calling them "Christ's body," Christ's bodily, physical presence in the world. If anybody encounters the risen Christ, it will be through the ragtag bunch of losers otherwise known as the church.

Christ fervently prayed that all of His followers – the church – would "be one" (Jn 17:21), and commanded us to get along with one another. Yet, from the first, we've been unable to live up to His expectations, having so little in common except love for Him.

Little wonder that, from the first, there was division.

Division is easy, a natural propensity in a culture of rugged individualism, consumerism, political factionalism, and self-protectiveness from discomforting truth. Togetherness is hard. Congregating requires empowerment from outside ourselves. The one who loves us together and calls us together can enable us to love together. Not I "but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 3:20), Paul told the Galatians.

When Jesus interceded for His followers, us, He prayed not that we would be orthodox or prophetic or even that we would be right. He begged God to make us one (Jn 17:21). "This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you have love for one another." (Jn 13:35).

And the truth is that we need one another in order to grow and mature in our faith. We need some jostling and challenge from pesky preachers, contentious fellow congregants, and quarrelsome colleagues in Christ whom God uses to say things to us that we don't want to hear.

Consensus is not our reason for gathering as a congregation. The sole source of togetherness is Christ – Christ has convened us, breathed upon us, and has sent us forth in mission to gather others in – sinners all. Just like us.

Ideal church members are persons who are able to love Christ enough to say, "While I don't agree with you (as best I understand your stance from your rather boring and incoherent 3 point sermons), since Jesus Christ has brought us together (without giving either of us much choice in the matter) and then commanded us to stay together in love (even though it would be easier to keep to ourselves), I'll keep talking, continue listening, and praying that we will grow more committed to Christ together."

Think what we are asking of people when they join a church: to believe that there's a gathering more important than their nation, political party or even their family, to give money for the needs of perfect strangers, to stay in conversation with those who are put off by their politics, to receive the gospel of God from the hands of another who may not be their type. Is it any wonder that Paul preaches mutual love to the Romans, telling them that loving one another is the fulfillment of all that Christ wants from us?

Paul is still preaching to us: Love one another. That's all there is. Love one another. Amen. (adapted from Willimon, op. cit. p. 34-35)