

Date: September 4, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 24

**SERMON: Love's Labors**

Text(s): Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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When Congress made Labor Day a national holiday in 1894, to celebrate the contributions of working class people, they selected the first Monday in September rather than May 1, which was favored by the Socialist party in this country and in others around the world. Congress wanted to avoid any association with Socialism or Communism. Over the years, however, Labor Day has lost much of its original flavor and has become simply the last big fling of the summer before everything starts up again. We celebrate labor by declaring a holiday from it.

This year, however, we're all realizing that for literally millions of our fellow Americans, this weekend is anything but a holiday from work. For many months and even years to come, the intensive labor of cleaning up and rebuilding after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina will engage many people full time and will engage all of us in some measure of sacrifice or hardship for some time to come.

But as long as this is Labor Day weekend, perhaps we can think about a particular kind of labor or work, that is the most important work that any of us will ever do, as well as the most difficult. I'm talking about what St. Paul calls "the labor of love."

Labor is work, not just any work, but work that is hard, demanding, and long. It's no accident that we speak of giving birth to a child as labor, and having recently been present with my daughter during her labor and delivery, I can tell you, I've never seen anyone work harder.

So why speak of "Love's Labors," which I'm sure many of you will have immediately recognized as an allusion to Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labors Lost*. Does loving someone really rise to the definition of labor as hard, demanding work? Well, yes, it does, as

both St. Paul and St. Matthew and Shakespeare recognized. Few things we do, in fact, are as demanding as the work of loving someone. And almost nothing we do is as important. In fact, it is not stretching things to say that the work of loving others is the very reason for our existence and the principal work that all of us are called to do.

This is not news. About a generation before Jesus, some students of the famous rabbi Hillel decided to have a little fun with their teacher. "Rabbi," they asked innocently, "is it possible to recite the whole Torah (the whole Law of God) while standing on one foot?"

Rabbi Hillel immediately lifted one of his feet off the ground, and replied, "To love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary." Hillel, and Jesus after him, and St. Paul in our text from Romans this morning were all simply taking their cues from the Torah itself. More specifically, these two statements are found in Deuteronomy 6:5, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength,*" and in Leviticus 19:18, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" They recognized that the whole multitude of commandments and ordinances and laws that made up the foundation of Israel's religion were but case-by-case outworkings of these two fundamental commands.

In fact, the Ten Commandments are simply an expansion of these two; the first four commandments tell us how to love God; the last six tell us how to love our neighbors. So it is perfectly natural that when St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome about what it means to live faithfully as Christians, he should say, "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. . . Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*"

Loving God and loving one another, you see, is not a peculiarly Christian responsibility; it is the fundamental demand of God for all people

everywhere. If there is a peculiarly Christian dimension to this affirmation of the centrality of love, it is in the rationale which Paul gives in our text from Romans where he grounds this command to love in the future redemption of the whole creation toward which God is directing us, and of which the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the first act.

*“For you know what time it is, how it is now the moment to awake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we first became believers.”*

According to Paul, that future exerts a kind of pressure on the present in which we live. With the history of God’s covenants of grace behind us, and the full glory of the uncontested reign of God over a redeemed and restored creation ahead of us, now is the time when we must do the work of love. Now is the time when we must live and walk between the times, between the past and the future

Now let’s bring this down from the abstract level of theology and talk about the labor of love in real life terms. And the first thing that crops up is a very practical question: what does it mean to talk being commanded to love God and love our neighbors? Is love something that can be commanded? Isn’t love an emotion? And if so, how can we command our emotions? We know we can’t do that. Try telling yourself not to feel hurt when someone says something unkind to you or about you. Does commanding yourself not to feel hurt work? Of course not. So how can we be commanded to love?

Here is where the usually versatile and subtle English language is sadly impoverished. The poor word love has to carry so much freight in our language. It describes everything from the feelings we have for our newborn children to the deepest feelings of friendship to the most erotic relationships that are the subject of much popular music and many movies to our passion for chocolate or our feelings of patriotism. It can get

very confusing to know what love really means.

I remember once when we were visiting my parents out in western Pennsylvania nearly twenty years ago, my middle brother Rod and his family had come from Michigan so we could all be together. His eldest son Matt was about five years old at the time. (Matt just got married this summer.) But on this particular occasion, when he was only five years old, he had been playing outside in my parents’ backyard. He came running into Mom’s kitchen waving a hammer and shouting excitedly. “Grammy,” I found a big beetle.” Mom said, “Did you? What did you do with the beetle?” Little Matt got this absolutely beatific expression on his face as he launched into the story of his encounter with the beetle. Waving the hammer, he said, “I hit that beetle, I smashed that beetle, I squished that beetle, I loved that beetle.” I imagine the beetle might have appreciated being loved a little less by Matt.

Love *is* confusing. Human emotions are about the most unpredictable and confusing and mixed up things there are. And because love is so confusing, we’re sometimes about as heavy-handed in expressing our love as little Matt was with his hammer. We end up squishing others because we don’t know how to love them properly.

The kind of love that our scriptures are talking about is not a love that is based in our emotions at all, though it may involve our emotions. The particular word used here is a word that refers to behavior that is rooted not in our emotions, but in our wills. And behavior is something that can be commanded and controlled. This kind of love means behaving in a way that puts the other person’s good uppermost rather than our own self-interest. It means doing the thing or saying the word that will uplift or strengthen or help the other person whether we feel like it or not. We can’t control how we feel about someone else. The way we feel about someone is a function of personality, temperament, our history with that person, and

whether or not we've had a bad day at the office or the golf course. We *can* control how we behave toward others, however. It is how we decide to act that determines whether we are obeying the command to love.

And that's just the problem for us, isn't it? We find it easy to love some people and awfully difficult to behave lovingly toward some people. It's not hard to love a newborn baby or to love our grandmother or our spouse in those moments when the emotional chemistry is really working. It's not particularly hard to sit down and write a generous check for the relief efforts for the hurricane victims. Our hearts and sympathies are deeply touched. Our natural emotional response is to reach out in love to do whatever we can. Giving money to the relief efforts, praying for those affected, or perhaps even joining volunteer teams to labor personally on behalf on those who have lost so much are certainly concrete loving acts we can do. Loving those to whom we feel well disposed or whose plight moves us to compassion is important. Just because it's easy to show love to those who are lovable or whose plight moves us to compassion, doesn't detract from love's value.

But it's very hard and often painful to act lovingly to someone when we're angry at them, or when they've hurt us in some way. It's tough to act lovingly toward an elderly parent who is recalcitrant and stubborn and who makes all our attempts to show care very difficult. It's hard to love a wayward son or daughter who has broken our heart. It's tough to show love to our boss at work when he's acting like a real jerk. Love is not easy. It is hard work. It is labor.

How can we learn to do the hard work of love? How can we summon up the courage and determination to act lovingly toward those whose actions have made them unlovable? How can we love those with whom we have serious disagreements?

The Christians in the communities for

whom Matthew's gospel was written, evidently found this commandment to love one another as difficult as we do. If they had found it easy to love their fellow church members, it wouldn't have been necessary for Matthew to give such explicit instructions for a process of reconciliation. Notice that it's not the person who has done the wrong or caused the hurt who is instructed to take the first step toward reconciliation. Rather, it's the person who has been wronged, the one who has been hurt, who is instructed to take the initiative to see that fellowship is restored. That's just the opposite from the way we normally act, isn't it? If someone wrongs us, we work up a fine head of anger and demand an apology. Or we store away resentment and pretend that we're not hurt, but meanwhile, we lose no opportunity to make snide, uncomplimentary remarks about the person who has wronged us, without confronting them openly about the wrong.

I saw a great cartoon in the *New Yorker* some time ago. The wife comes into the living room where her husband is reading the newspaper, and she says, "Just in case you're interested, I'll be in the basement preserving resentments for the winter." I expect some of us spend more than our fair share of time in the basement preserving resentments, don't we? But that's not the gospel way. The gospel way is to go to the person who has wronged us or offended us, and in humility, seek reconciliation.

This is the context for properly understanding that next paragraph: "*Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*"

This is not a promise that all our prayers will be answered, as it has often been misinterpreted. It is a promise, that if people are sincerely undertaking the labors of love, seriously

seeking reconciliation with each other, then God will be actively involved in that process and will grant them their desire for reconciliation. For the work of love that they are doing with each other is ultimately the work of God.

We have to learn to obey the command to love our neighbors, not only on the interpersonal, relational level, but also on the larger level of society. I'm sure all of us have been painfully aware this week that the vast majority of those trapped by the floodwaters in New Orleans were black and poor. I don't pretend to have all the answers, but somehow, we have to find a way to concretely love those whom our society has consistently and persistently marginalized and ignored. I don't think we can just content ourselves with sending money for relief. This disaster was at least as much man-made as it was a natural disaster. There was nothing natural about the condition of the levees in New Orleans or the systemic poverty of that region, or the systemic poverty of much of Maine, for that matter. Obeying the command to love in these larger terms will involve us in the political process, for politics is the way societies accomplish their goals. Those of us who take seriously Paul's words that "*salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed,*" will have to be asking ourselves some serious questions about how we can "*owe no one anything except to love.*" If our world is ever to have hope of freedom from the evils of poverty, discrimination and violence, it will have to see the possibilities for reconciliation lived out in local communities of people who are claiming the promise that the Risen Lord is with us, and in his name undertaking the labors of love that bring healing and hope.