

A Delightful Debt

Sermon, September 4, 2011

Texts: Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13:8-14

I told you a few years back about a mildly devious little technique I learned in a seminar, a technique I've dubbed "the Jerry technique." The speaker was teaching a little trick to use when seeking to make a favorable impression or when dealing with difficult people and/or (*I'm hesitant to share it again, lest some of you think I may have tried this on you!*). She said, "*Just think of someone in your life you really enjoy, a really good friend whom you've missed seeing. Someone whose presence would be a wonderful and delightful surprise to you if he/she came walking through the door. Now, simply pretend that actual person you are greeting is that wonderful person you are thinking about.*" When you do that, so many unconscious actions of your entire facial and body language come into play, and it really works! The person you are pretending is someone else feels warmly greeted, welcomed and affirmed, and more often than not you yourself find the encounter taking on a happier tone. The person I see in my mind's eye when I practice this technique is Jerry, an old friend from my Germany days who is sorely missed. Those of you who know me know I like to laugh, but I don't think I've laughed harder with anyone else in my lifetime (*except for my wife*) than I have with him. When I use this technique, I "put Jerry" on the person I'm greeting, I actually begin to feel better, uplifted, I'm thinking pleasant thoughts, and the whole demeanor of the encounter takes on a more delightful tone.

The analogy may not be perfect, but Paul is promoting something of a Jerry technique in the last verse of our Epistle reading, "Put on Jesus!" he writes. "*Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to satisfy the desires of the sinful nature.*" Act like He really is there before you, even "on" you. Greet and treat others as you would treat and greet the Lord Himself ... and you'll find that does much to influence your thoughts and your behavior. That, by the way, is part of Jesus' point in the Gospel reading this morning ... where two or three come together in His name, where two or three come together "clothed" in Him, He promises to be present there! This Labor Day, as we prepare to return to our fall schedules, at work, in school, at home, and especially here in this church, let us recommit ourselves to putting on Jesus Christ ... not "putting Him on" in the sense of *deceiving* Him, but literally putting Him ON, on ourselves and on others ... and then trusting Him to attend to our needs. Let us live out of the power of the Christ within us, and let us love every person who crosses our paths as if that person were the Lord Jesus Christ. In verse 13, Paul wrote, "*Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*" Putting on Jesus helps us to do this; it helps to behave decently.

Fifteen or so years ago country singer Steve Vaus touched a sympathetic chord with many people with his song, "Black and White." I'm not much of a country music fan, so I'm about fifteen years late in discovering this song. The lyrics, which I won't sing for you at this time, go like this:

You could hardly see for all the snow, Spread the rabbit ears as far as they go,
Pull a chair up to the TV set, [and hear] "Good night David, Good night Chet"
Depending on the channel you tuned, you got Rob and Laura or Ward and June.
It felt so good, felt so right; life looked better in black and white!

I Love Lucy, The Real McCoys, Dennis the Menace, the Cleaver boys,
Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Wagon Train; Superman, Lois Lane,
Father Knows Best, Patty Duke, Rin Tin Tin and Lassie too/
Donna Reed on Thursday night ... Life looked better in black and white.

I wanna go back to black and white. Everything always turned out right.
Simple people, simple lives; good guys always won the fights
Now nothing is the way it seems, in living color or on the screen.
I wanna go back to black and white;

In God they trusted, in bed they slept, a promise made was a promise kept
They never cussed or broke their vows; they'd never make the network now.
But if I could, I'd rather be in a TV town in '63.
It felt so good, felt so right; life looked better in black and white.

I'd trade all the channels on the satellite if I could just turn back the clock tonight,
To when everybody knew wrong from right. Life was better in black and white.

Now, some of those lyrics are ancient history to some of you here, but others of us can really resonate. (*On a related note, I was delighted to find that AMC has taken to playing old reruns of **The Rifleman**, an old black and white series with "simple people, simple lives, and the good guys always won the fights." My brothers and I never failed to miss that program when we were young.*) We know, of course, life was not better for everyone in 1963. And we have made good progress on many fronts. But we can also acknowledge that not all change is progress. Is there anyone here who doesn't realize there is much

more confusion about personal morality, about right from wrong today? We are rightfully concerned about huge financial deficits in today's economy, but we are also concerned there is a huge deficit of decency. And people are being hurt. Sexually-transmitted diseases. Young families being buffeted from every side. Crudity and licentious living favorably portrayed in the media, in our magazines, on the front page of our newspapers. A record number of children living in single-parent homes. Abuse that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Marriages of twenty and thirty years coming apart. And much of it can be directly attributed to the so-called sexual liberation of the past forty-fifty years, which has ballooned into a huge Decency Deficit throughout our culture today.

It was about twenty three years ago, while serving an international congregation in Germany, that I was leading an adult bible study group in my apartment and we were looking at this same passage from Romans. About thirty young adults were there from England, Scotland, Germany, Holland, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Rumania, Sweden, Thailand and the USA; we had Sarah from Sierra Leone, Ivy from Singapore, and even Cindy from the far-off remote northern land of Minnie-SO-ta. We read verse 13: "*Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*" The inevitable question came up, "What exactly is sexual immorality? How do you define it?" That's a question lots of people, even in the church, even at the highest levels of the church, seem unable to answer.

Now, this was an issue of more than just passing interest for this group! We had in our group a young woman from Thailand, who, as a child, had been brutally victimized by the insidious sex trafficking in Bangkok. We had Angela from Scotland who had been in an abusive live-in relationship during which time she came to faith (*through my wife's ministry, actually*); finding strength in her new found Christian faith, she gained the self respect and confidence to pack this guy's bags and kick him out. We had teacher Nancy who was divorced from her husband of fifteen or so years due to his incessant philandering. We had Frank, now a ship's captain on a German freighter, who had seen more human depravity in many of the world's seaports than many of us here could even imagine. We had Henry from Uganda, the third son of one of his polygamous father's four wives. He had never seen monogamy modeled (*for that matter, let me state the obvious and point out this is no longer a problem confined to deep dark Africa*). Many in that room had been affected, and affected adversely, by the effects of amorality and moral confusion in the sexual arena. As literally represented in that apartment twenty three years ago, our world is terribly confused about love. So much hurt and harm have grown out of loving intentions. Love is confused with lust, with affections, with sentiment, with emotions, with feelings, with personal preference, none of which are really the central meaning of love as defined in the Scriptures. The word "love" has been so misused in our culture that it has come to mean virtually nothing. Except in tennis. But then again, that's precisely what it means in tennis ... nothing!

Well, in our readings today both Paul and Jesus speak about the importance, the gravity, the debt of our duty to love one another. Paul writes, "*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" One thing to get straight is that the Bible refers to love as a duty; it is a debt we owe. It can be, and most of the time really is, a delightful duty, but it is a duty. Love is a feeling, to be sure, but more often than not love is an act of the will. It is something you do. It's a verb, not a noun. It's not primarily something you feel, or something you have, or something you're in; it's something you do, something you give; in fact, it is something you even owe to those around you. And as you work to "pay off" the delightful debt of love, the Decency Deficit is greatly reduced! And more often than not, the good feelings associated with genuine love follow.

Then Paul goes on to define more precisely what he means when he uses the word "love." He cites the latter portion of the commandments which have to do with our relationships with others, concluding they are summed up in this one rule: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" He goes on to clarify further, by telling us what love does NOT do: "Love does no harm (*or, wrong*) to a neighbor." Love does no harm, love does not encourage harm; love does not show itself in allowing others to be harmed, love does not pay money to see others being harmed or abused. The love Paul is talking about is not about gratifying ourselves at another's expense. Love never involves or endorses taking, abusing, harming, stealing, jealousies, coveting, sexual immorality, dissensions. These are all *repellent* activities, and love is an *attractive* force. Authentic love has nothing to do with these repellent activities, these repulsive activities. Love does not repel or harm or threaten or give another cause to fear. Rather, authentic love *seeks the other's good* -- even the good of those who do not agree with us, even the good of those we do not like. Love treats the other as if that person were Jesus himself.

Paul continues. "*So, wake up and get dressed! Put aside the dark deeds, the dark attitudes, the dark behavior and clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Every day we wake up and try to decide what is best to wear today. Well, perhaps the best fashion advice we could possibly receive is "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Dress up! Put on your Jesus "power suit," and play the part of the "uniform" you are wearing! And as you do so, the Spirit goes to work on you and makes it less and less of a role you are playing, and more and more of an actuality in your person. Jesus is a style that never goes out of season. Clothing ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ does change our image, it changes us, thus enabling us to love better, to pay our debt of love, thus helping to reduce the Decency Deficit in our world.