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Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14

## DEBT TO SOCIETY

The average American household carries \$90,000 dollars in debt. This includes student loans, car loans, and mortgages. The average American credit card debt is around \$5,700. And then there is the massive debts many students incur to pay for college--debts that can burden students for decades to come. Clearly, we are accustomed to owing people a lot.

And then there are all those forms of obligation we owe that have nothing to do with money. These are things people expect of us. We owe them something of ourselves. We owe our employers our time between 9 and 5 and our abilities and talents that are to be given over to the job. We owe our families our commitment and our care and our time. Our communities and nation expect us to be useful citizens who pay our taxes. And so we have a lot of obligations to meet. We owe.

The Apostle Paul says to us today, "Owe no one anything. . . Owe no one anything *except* to love one another." He makes this statement just after he has preached about the Christian's obligation to government authorities and even our obligation to pay our taxes. Paul acknowledges that we have obligations we must fulfill to many entities in society, but then he puts all these social and civic obligations in perspective. He says, the only debt we owe to anyone is to love one another. Love is our debt. It is an odd thing to think about love as a debt we owe.

When Paul talked about love, he meant something different than how most of us understand that word. He was not talking about sentimental love. He was not talking about romantic love, or love that is based on an emotional feeling. Rather, when Paul said that we

Christians have an obligation to love, he meant that we have an obligation to seek our neighbor's highest good. We have an obligation to seek our neighbor's highest good. We don't have to know the person well to seek their highest good, in fact they could be complete strangers to us. In fact, we don't even have to like them to seek their highest good. But we are obligated as Christians to seek their highest good.

In fact, this obligation to love is, according to Paul, the summation of all the commandments. The commandments are all those "rules" we follow in order to be "good people." People often think about religion, whatever religion that may be, as being the sets of requirements a person must fulfill to make themselves right with God--to please God. What does God want from me? And so religions teach us what to do and what not to do. Don't steal. Don't kill. Go to church. Pray this way. Eat this. Don't eat this. Give your money. Don't sleep with your neighbor's husband or wife. Religious commandments organize our lives and our behaviors.

Paul tells us that all these commandments can be summed up with one commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself. This one commandment fulfills all the commandments. Paul says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." If you ever wonder what pleases God, what God requires of you and your life, the answer is love. Not a warm sentimental love--although there is nothing wrong with warm sentimental feelings. But what God requires from you and from me is a love that seeks our neighbor's highest good.

Now on the page of my Bible, these words sound really wonderful. But let's try taking these words off the page and plunking them down in the middle of our extended families, or into your marriage. Try taking these words into your job or into a Buffalo Public School board meeting.

Or better yet, try taking these words about our obligation to love one another, our obligation to seeking our neighbor's highest good, try taking these into a church. Churches can be true testing grounds for this obligation to love. If you have spent much time in a church, any church of any denomination, you will undoubtedly know how church communities can test and try one's patience and the ability to love. And so churches fight and churches split and they have done so for thousands of years. People shake their heads whenever a church conflict erupts. But in truth, church communities are just like any other community: a family, a workplace community, a neighborhood community. They are filled with very flawed people who find it very, very hard to love one another.

And yet, this is the debt we owe. This is what we owe our fellow human beings--the stranger, the enemy, the family member, the friend, the colleague, the church member. Owe no one anything except to love one another.

So, that leaves us Christians with the hard work of loving our neighbor. Jesus addresses this issue in Matthew's reading today. He lays out a process for loving other people even when there has been hurt and hard feelings--because that's what's going to happen in communities. His plan is grounded in the belief that forgiveness and reconciliation are part of what loving one another will involve. And this will involve effort. And so Jesus lays out a process whereby if you have been wronged by a member of the community, you go and talk to that person. And if they won't hear you, then you get another person to go with you. And then if they still won't listen, you gather still others together. And so on. In other words, you keep at it. You keep giving it your effort to make the situation better, to rectify the problem.

In other words, love demands effort. We don't just stew in silence. We don't just write people off. Love demands that we strive to forgive and to reconcile. We are obligated to love one another. We owe that to one another.

When I read this lesson by Jesus about all these steps we should take if we have been wronged by someone in the community, I typically imagine myself as the wronged individual. I wonder if that happens to you too--if that is where you envision yourself as Jesus offers this lesson. Do you imagine, as I do, the people who have wronged you, hurt you: the family member, the colleague, the neighbor, the friend? Oh, we could keep going. We've all been wronged. If only they would listen to us, hear us out, like Jesus tells us they should. They should listen to us!

But what if we are the ones who need to do the listening? What if we are the ones who have caused the injury? Are we willing to listen?

White people in America sometimes have a hard time understanding the anger that may arise from our African-American neighbors. Some white people think, "Hey, slavery ended a long time ago. Get over it!" Some white people don't understand or can't appreciate the long lasting implications of our country's institutionalized racial injustice or the ways that racial inequality still pervades our society. We, and when I say "we" I mean us individually but also us collectively as a society, we white people have had a hard time listening to our African-American brothers and sisters when they have come and voiced to us the ways they have been wronged and injured by us. Instead, we as a society have labeled them "trouble makers" when African-Americans have raised their voices to resist slavery, or to demand civil rights, or to seek fair educational practices, fair housing practices, fair employment practices, or to protest police misconduct. Over the centuries we white Americans have been slow to listen and slow to love.

But the way of Jesus demands something more from us. The way of Jesus, the Christian way, tells us that we owe one another an obligation--the obligation to love. Love means we can't walk away from the problem. Love means we can't ignore the problem. Love means we can't reject the people who have been injured by the problem. Love demands that we seek our neighbor's highest good. And love requires us listening to the ways we have messed up.

In October, our presbytery has been invited to participate with 3 neighboring presbyteries in a workshop that will examine the issue of racism. This day long workshop in Rochester will involve examining how racism is not only reflected in personal prejudice but is also manifested in systems and institutions. There are flyers at the aisle side of each pew giving the details of this workshop. I will be attending this workshop and if any of you would like to join me, just let me know and we can car pool together. It is a completely free workshop and includes lunch. I hope to take some of the information gathered at this workshop and include it in an adult class I will offer here at UPC later this program year.

"Owe no one anything *except* to love one another," instructs Paul. We owe one another love. Not just some people, not just the ones we like, not just the people we know. We owe *all* people the obligation of love, to seek their highest good, to work toward forgiveness and reconciliation and justice because this is how the highest good may be realized. In fact, this is how *our* highest good is realized--when we love one another as Jesus has loved us.