

Sermon, September 6, 2020
"The Debtor's Life"
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

So what's significant about November, 1976? OK we elected Jimmy Carter as President, seems like a long time ago doesn't it? Anybody got anything else? Well it was the month I moved to Maine. Caribou to be precise. Came under no false pretenses. Caribou in November? Not high on your travel agent destinations. Still seems like a long time ago. But Nov. 21, 1976 was the debut of a movie that would ultimately have five sequels and become an American icon. Anyone got it? Rocky – seems like a long time ago doesn't it. In one scene Rocky comes and gets his girlfriend's brother out of jail and they get in a bit of a disagreement about the obligations of life.

Rocky: Look nobody owes nobody nuttin'. You owe yourself.

Paulie: You're wrong - friends owe.

Rocky: Friends don't owe, they do because they want to do.

Sounds like Rocky may have been reading St. Paul but we'll get to him later. But doesn't that describe common American folk wisdom? We say we don't like to owe anything to anyone yet 55% of Americans who own credit cards have some credit card debt. And we might say we don't want anyone to owe us but do you keep track?

Living in the Roman Empire at the time of St. Paul was a culture of obligation. To the emperor they "owed" honor and allegiance and if it wasn't given, off with your head; to their benefactor (if they had one, and many likely did), they owed also money, possessions, honor; slaves owed service and their very lives and so on.

So for Paul to say "Owe no one anything" he turns the culture topsy turvy; he reconfigures the arrangement of the furniture. He eliminates the structures inherent in the ethic of the Roman cultural narrative. If obligation was related to position and to upholding status, authority, or certain relational dynamics, Paul's exhortation to owe *nothing* forces some rethinking. Their whole culture was about owing, you did keep score and the end game was to have more people owe you than you owe them.

Except there was an except – a really big except

Owe nothing **except** to love one another. Wow that's a really big "except" Paul.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Not always easy. Do you know how much noise my neighbor makes, how much trash is in their yard, how their dog pees on my flowers? Why is loving our neighbor so hard?

And how do we do this, Paul? We do it by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, and making no provision for the flesh – the flesh here meaning all of those natural cultural obligations that make us beholden to one another. The verb in Greek for putting on the Lord Jesus describes putting on clothes. Putting on the Lord Jesus ahead of time is as public an activity as wearing new clothes. Done in public, it *bears witness* to the hope that it is in us. Lives characterized by loving one's neighbor as oneself will offer testimony to an alternative future. And what clothes do we put on? Our baptismal garment which means to follow its promises: to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to love our neighbor as ourselves, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Paul also says, "*you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep*". It seems like we are in a very important moment in history. The world has woken up to a greater degree in terms of how we look at each other, how we treat each other. The culture that says you have natural advantages because of your skin color, your gender, your sexual orientation, your body size, your ethnic background – that is as hard to unlearn for us and the culture of obligation was for the Romans. That's why there is protest and demonstration and disagreement because we are undergoing a fundamental cultural shift about how we see each other.

So what are we left with? Love one another. That's it? That's it? Do you want to know why we find this phrase so often in the Bible? Because that's it! Do you know why we hear this phrase so often in the Bible? Because it's so hard, it's as difficult as Rocky taking on Apollo Creed. So who said this in the Bible?

James 2:8 repeats this message almost verbatim: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

Loving your neighbor, Jesus said, is the greatest commandment. In his last words to his disciples, Jesus called this a new commandment. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

It's not obvious in what sense Jesus's commandment is "new." It's an ancient commandment that goes back 3000 years to the founding of the Hebrew community: "Love your neighbor as yourself," says Leviticus 19:18. Perhaps it's new to the extent that Jesus demonstrated the breadth and depth of God's love to every person he met, especially to his wayward disciples.

Love, said Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, is the greatest gift; without it I'm just a big, old noisy nuisance.

The church father Jerome describes how John the evangelist, author of the gospel and the book of Revelation, preached at Ephesus into his nineties. Christian tradition holds that he died in about the year 100 CE. At that age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into the church at Ephesus on a stretcher. Then, when he could no longer preach a normal sermon, he would lean up on one elbow. The only thing he said was, "Little children, love one another." People would then carry him back out of the church. This continued for weeks, says Jerome. And every week John repeated his one-sentence sermon: "Little children, love one another." Weary of the repetition, the congregation finally asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" "Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."

I'm going to give the last word to a great man who passed away this week, Wendell Berry the Kentucky farmer, environmentalist and poet who died at the age of 92. Berry once said, "I only live to the extent that I love" but more eloquently in his poem, "Leavings":

*"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.*

*I have no love
except it come from Thee.*

*Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."*

