

A Two-Handed Theology

Romans 13:8-14

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13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

13:9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

13:11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

13:12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;

13:13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

13:14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

I have had a really difficult time loving my neighbor lately. I mean that both in the literal and more metaphorical sense. I don't understand the point of view of my actual neighbor. She tells me about how our current pandemic has been planned, because she saw "Plandemic" before the media shut it down. She says the COVID cases are so high because of Black Lives Matter protesters. She and her husband also fly a huge military flag above the American flag on their front lawn. While I understand a need to find something that makes "sense" during this senseless time, I don't get it. I think that way of thinking could be harmful.

My other "neighbor," or the other people God wants me to love, are also proving difficult. People who support the shooting of protestors, who want another 4 years of oligarchy and racism, who fly the confederate flag from their enormous trucks, and who don't wear masks because they say science isn't real...I am finding it near impossible to love these people.

But because I'm human, my version of love is...well, limited.

It helps that I have a lot of people who think like me in my inner circle. But I'm not called to just be there for my inner circle. Nor am I so sheltered I only connect with those close to me. All of us have connections to groups outside of us, and all of us encounter "the other" in our lives in some way, shape or form.

What I have personally felt called to in the last few years is to explore this "other." Who has the power, and who is marginalized? I've come to the realization that my "other" is different from the world's "other." And that's a tricky reality to come to terms with. While the immigrant, widow, orphan, poor and disenfranchised are on the margins for the world, in my theological framework, they are front and center. Those on the margins, for me, are people who think differently than I

do. Those on the margins are the opposite of the different types of folks I listed. The anti-immigrant, anti-mask wearing, anti-vaxers, anti-Black lives matter...they're on the margins in my world view. So what's my call to them? What is our call to anybody like that in our own lives?

I can feel my insides bristle thinking about this, and maybe yours are, too. The voices I just mentioned hold a lot of power. For instance, there are many wealthy folks who are anti-immigrant, and the idea of "centering" wealthy voices just goes against everything I know about Jesus. But I want to make the distinction here between "centering" and "loving." You don't have to adopt a certain mindset to love someone with that mindset.

This is where I like to refer to peacebuilder Lisa Schirch's "Two-handed theology." This is a theology of both/and. In her article for the Conrad Grabel review, Schirch talks about peacebuilding in terms of a theology that has 2 elements to it. She prefaces it by saying that for many years, Mennonites embraced a 2 kingdom theology as it relates to Anabaptists and the world. In other words, Mennonites live in God's kingdom and the State rules the secular kingdom. However, over time, this proves problematic. An apathy for the unjust status quo of the state can develop. Mennonites can look like they are affirming of violence at the hands of the State. With this mindset, Mennonites can remain pacifists and also "allow" the State to act violently toward those whom Jesus calls us to serve.

Schirch says that this theology does not allow Mennonites to actually be peacebuilders. Schirch concedes that rarely does any ballot have exactly what Mennonites are looking for. In fact, as we look forward to the November election, we may be feeling stuck between a rock and a hard place in some respects. But as people called by God, we are also called to participate in such a way that allows the most good and least harm to be done.

This is where a two-handed theology comes in. This comes in part from another peacebuilder, Barbara Deming, saying the following: "With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, "Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life." But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised out-stretched – maybe with love and sympathy, maybe not – but always outstretched. . . . With this hand we say, "I won't let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I'll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of one another."

This is where a two-handed approach comes from. One hand stops oppression, insists that Black Lives Matter, demands an end to unjust wars, calls those in power into accountability for those with little recourse in our current system. The other hand is open in invitation. This invitation is what draws me, personally, into this theology. Maybe there's love and sympathy in that invitation, but maybe not.

An invitation does not rely on our love and sympathy. An invitation does not rely on our feelings at all, actually. What the outstretched hand is saying is, I have faith you can transform. I will be here for you when you do. Since we are both God's children, I am leaving a door open for you.

It's that open hand, that open door, that I believe is our love for neighbor. It's a way we can both prophetically proclaim the good news and, like John the Baptist, call for repentance, and also

love our neighbor who is spouting hurtful rhetoric. You can't ask people to be where they are not, however, you can both call for a stop to hate and also leave an open door. This is the ultimate both/and situation.

I think this mindset is important when coming to this passage from Romans. Here, Paul is talking about owing no one anything but love. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, and therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

In this letter, Paul is emphasizing the importance of love as a virtue above all others. It informs, guides, and fulfills. According to Israel Kamudzandu, a New Testament scholar, Paul is calling for a different love, a love that leads to the restoration of genuine relationships. Hate and oppression dehumanize. Love has the potential to birth a new world.

This love, according to Kamudzandu, has a both evangelical and missional task. I think that bears repeating. Your love of neighbor, your humanization of those who disagree with you, or love of those who dehumanize you, is both evangelical and missional. To love is to preach the Gospel, as the heart of the Gospel is found in our love of the "other." While the world tells us to seek out happiness, that happiness is the zenith of life, the Gospels tell us living, learning, and growing in love is the highest priority we have. The church cannot reach its God-given potential until it has learned to love others. The mission of the church must be baptized in compassionate love for others.

I should make an emphasis here on that two-handed theology Lisa Schirch talks about. Loving others does not mean we allow ourselves to be hurt, harmed, or abused. Loving doesn't mean allowing or being permissive of destructive and harmful behavior. It is ok to demand a stop to that behavior. It is ok to say no to people's mistreatment of you. Loving others doesn't mean you need to descend into a horrible situation for the sake of love. Love can mean saying no, and love can mean leaving. It is also ok for that second hand, that hand of invitation, to come in due course. It can take a long time for a hand of invitation to be extended. Everyone's journey is different.

Kamudzandu also addresses the latter part of this scripture. He states that many people may interpret what Paul is talking about as "end times" rhetoric. What he encourages the reader to do is think about Paul's ethic of love. He states that our failure to love makes us debtors to God. Our love of others activates love in them, creating a chain reaction. This speaking of "end times" may be an alert to not get to the end of your life without you yourself creating an ethic of love. Without making love a lifestyle, we are condemning ourselves to darkness.

As Kamudzandu says, "The church is indeed a place where persons can be organized, socialized, and mobilized to effectively love others. Like art, love can be used as a way for people to express, explore, and perceive the world in new and revitalizing ways. To grow in love is surely a constant form of growing in creative labor."

Our ability to love makes us rather strange people. And what a shame that we lose that love so often in being "church" together. So much of being religious has turned into lines in the sand, keeping our church "pure," and claiming to do the work of Jesus while actively turning away our neighbors. This is where we come back to the both/and. The two-handed theology that I keep making reference to is so essential to our understanding of church and being church to one another, regardless of whether or not we always agree.

The work of loving one another is difficult. Paul's task to us is difficult. One of the sometimes almost aggravating things about the Bible is how simply it can lay things out for us. While it is sometimes "that simple," there's nothing simple about love. Our emotions, our ego, and our personalities all mix in with our ability to see God in the other and sometimes it can make for complicated results. I believe in God's grace and that we have the space and opportunity to mess up. The ongoing narrative of God's story shows God's people time and again "getting it wrong" and God loving people anyway, or God working through us messing up.

And this two-handed theology is rife with opportunity to get it wrong sometimes. It asks for a both/and; it's asking us to both to resist evil and actively reach out a hand to the evildoer. We are going to make mistakes, and get it wrong, and be offensive, and say all the wrong things but that doesn't mean we don't try.

What I hope we can take from this scripture and from this approach for loving our enemies and those whom we've loved for a long time is that love is work, but love is also fulfillment. As much work as it takes to be in various stages of relationship with folks, ultimately, we are fulfilling the law. These actions are both preposterous and make total sense. Loving one's neighbor is a lot of extra work and it's the easiest thing in the world. Love is both the fulfillment of the law and the very essence of the law.

When we take the time to love, we are living out the Gospel in a very real way. That love sometimes comes with the word "no." That love sometimes comes with the word "stop." But it would be a very cheap and inauthentic act if it did not include those words. And those words are never said without an invitation. So as you go into this week, love as though your life depends on it. Love with boundaries, but also with invitations. Love in such a way that you are fulfilling God's kingdom on earth in the here and now. Amen.