

Romans 13: 8-10
The Law of Love
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September 23, 2012
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This summer one of the news headlines was about "The Vatican cracks down on American nuns." After a lengthy investigation it was concluded that a reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about 80 per cent of the 57,000 Catholic nuns in the United States was necessary to keep these unruly nuns under control.

According to the Vatican report, too many of these sisters seem to have been influenced by radical feminism and to have fallen out of step with church teaching on homosexuality and women's ordination.

The Vatican report criticised the sisters for silence on abortion which is seen as a rejection of faith, church doctrine and is deemed incompatible with religious life.'

Some American bishops have openly criticised the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' support of the Affordable Care Act, informally known as Obamacare, which the bishops strenuously oppose.

Network, a nun-founded Washington-based lobbying group that focuses on poverty, immigration and healthcare issues, was singled out in the report as "silent on the right to life".

"I think we scare them," said Network's executive director, Sister Simone Campbell, referring to the male hierarchy.

Network, which was founded by Catholic nuns in 1971, said the group was not consulted during the inquiry. Sister Campbell said that its focus on poverty, immigration and healthcare stemmed from its founding mission.

The Vatican's findings cited "serious doctrinal problems which affect many in consecrated life".

Conflicts between Catholic sisters and nuns and the episcopate/Vatican have become a familiar theme in Catholic life in America. But this crackdown seems to take the debate up another level.

Sister Campbell said she worried that the male leaders failed to recognise the "witness of women religious".

"I made my vows over 40 years ago to serve the people of God and that service is unseen in this document and the debate," she said.

(Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/world/american-nuns-too-feminist-for-the-men-of-the-vatican-20120420-1xcli.html#ixzz273iYACae>)

In my seminary education I have benefitted greatly from the wisdom, kindness and ministry of some very smart Catholic sisters in academia. It would be the last thing to call any of them unfaithful or moving away from the faith. In fact, these women are some of the most faithful and dedicated people I have ever met. Many of them work in the "trenches" of ministry.

Over decades, these women have reformed and challenged the doctrine of the church not to dismiss it but to make it more human, more in-line with the real life experiences of the day to day ministry that is done in hospitals, nursing homes, health clinics, shelters, schools and universities; most of the time, this work is done quietly, and at other times, very publically. But what was true then and is now, this kind of reforming will get one into trouble. All they are doing is following faithfully in Jesus' footsteps.

Jesus was a faithful Jew, a rabbi who followed the laws, or the 'doctrine of the synagogue' of his religion. Jesus ministered predominantly to the Jews of his time, and they all lived with these laws every day. They were not surprised by Jesus saying, that "he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."

He fulfilled the laws alright, by living them more clearly toward the intent in which they were given by God - to the dismay of the Scribes and Pharisees. And that got him into trouble more often than not. In Jesus' time, breaking the laws could mean serious consequences, and by that I mean death by stoning.

When Jesus and his disciples gleaned the fields or healed people on the Sabbath, he did not dismiss the Sabbath, but he made more human. Would God punish you if you were to help an accident victim on a Sunday morning on your way to church? Of course not! He challenged the rigidity of the laws, but in no way did he dismiss them.

It is for that reason that we find no new laws in the Christian Scriptures but a solid repeat of the already given ones in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the 10 commandments. And the good news is that 613 laws of the Hebrew Scriptures were cut down by Jesus to two laws: "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and to love your neighbor as yourself". Paul takes this message to the Christian Community in Rome. What do you need to know about being a Christian? Love your neighbor as yourself. All of the laws are wrapped up in it.

I think that we have clearly established who our neighbor is: everybody. We are to love everybody. No exceptions! To love everybody is to fulfill the law. That is what we are about as Christian. And I must admit that this is probably our biggest challenge as Christians – to love everybody, and to love them unconditionally. So, let's explore what it means **to love** everybody.

In general, love is a good thing. "All you need is love" to "make the world go around", right? Our first association when we hear the word love or verb to love is with that "high" feeling we get when we "fall in love." But knowing very well, this kind of love is fleeting and does not last very long unless it is replaced by true love. Love is caring in action. Love isn't what we feel but what we do.

That is the definition of love in Scriptures. The Bible indicates that love is from God. In fact, the Bible says "God is love." Love is one of the primary characteristics of God. Likewise, God has endowed us with the capacity for love, since we are created in His image. This capacity for love is one of the ways in which we are "created in the image of God."

There are different kinds of Love. There is "eros" the love your experience when you fall in love. There is "phileo" (brotherly love) which is based upon familiarity and direct interaction with the people we know. It is conditional love, based upon how other people behave toward us. Phileo is a soulish kind of love, connected through our emotions.

But the most commonly used Greek word that translates "love" in the New Testament is "agape." This love is represented by God's love for us. It is a non-partial, sacrificial love that goes far beyond eros and phileo love.

Agape love requires a deep relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Agape love gives everything and expects nothing back in return. That is how to read 1 Cor. 13, the NT's most famous passage on love. Agape love is patient, kind, truthful, unselfish, trusting, believing, hopeful, and enduring, not jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish or angry. That is true love which cannot fail. This description perfectly fits God's love toward us, and it should be the standard with which we are to love everybody.

Jesus tells us and it gets reiterated by his followers, to love everybody, no matter what that person has done, no matter whether they deserve it or not, just love them, unconditionally. We are to give them what they don't deserve, reward them when they are not good, be kind to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, forgive those who sin greatly, and be generous for no reason.

This kind of unconditional love, given to the undeserving is an "unjust" economy, and assault on "common sense." That is why it is so hard, and why even Christian followers of Jesus seldom use it. When we are wronged, it is humanly "natural" (and sometimes advisable) to fight so that right can prevail. There are

many places and situation where justice still needs to be pursued. I am not saying to abandon justice. But there comes a point where we must drop the fight and turn the tables, so that a different energy might enter into the mix. For love creates a new chemistry, new possibilities, new relationships.

It is easy to love those who are loveable, to be kind to those who are kind to us. But as followers of Jesus, we are to be different, as he was different. We are to love everybody, without reason.

What does that look like if practiced?

It means that we won't hold anything against them, and that we will seek to do them good.

We will pray for them – and pray not for God to correct them, but to bless them. We will treat them as if we don't even know anything bad about them: with dignity, respect, and fairness.

We won't gossip or complain about them.

When we speak of them, we might try to objectively describe what they've done, but we won't ascribe motivation to their actions.

We won't give ourselves the bitter, poisonous satisfaction of condemning or ridiculing them.

We'll know that we are capable of just as much wrongdoing, given the right circumstances, and that they're probably also capable of great good. Ours is not to judge such things.

Think this is hard to do? You bet yah! Can it be done? We certainly can't achieve it by deciding it is a good idea to do so. Unconditional love that is poured out upon others for no reason is not really a human trait; it is divine. We must rely upon God to accomplish this through prayer, for prayer humbles us, and when we approach things with humility, we will be able to set aside the ego-driven impulses and open our hearts to a new and different way of being. It is not about changing the other; it is all about changing ourselves.

Has this ever been put into practice and made a difference? Actually the world saw a rare example of how both justice and undeserving love can exist side-by-side in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. Accountability and truth were not casualties of love; they were handmaidens to it. Just like Jesus, who always named the sin before he unconditionally forgave it, those who had done great evil in South Africa were required to name their victims and other witnesses exactly what they had done. They were required to face and hear how their actions affected others. Then they were released, scot-free. They had come to the truth, but once they did, they were not held within the normal system of wrongdoing and punishment. They were held to the higher system of divine forgiveness.

Many of the leaders of this movement were Christians, among them Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They realized that unconditional forgiveness, given in the context

of accountability would be the only thing that would heal their nation. If they insisted on the usual way to the world – revenge, punishment, imprisonment for crimes committed – the bitterness of their suffering would only increase. They saw no peace possible in retribution. There is only peace and healing where, in the context of accountability and truth, love is exchanged for hatred.

As followers of Christ, we are called to become vehicles for God's unconditional and healing love. And in order for us to be that, we have to shift our attention away from the circumstance or the relationship or the person we are called to love, and toward love itself. Our focus is solely upon love, which really is another word for God.

The Dalai Lama speaks of this often in terms of developing the capacity for kindness, for goodness and for love. When we look within our heart and develop our own inner capacity for kindness, then it just comes out of us; it does not depend upon circumstances that support it. When we pray for growth of love and goodness within us, it is like a light that then simply shines. Jesus calls us to develop this divine capacity within:

“...so that you may be children of your God in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matt: 5:45).”

Like the sun, like the rain, divine love can then just come out of us, toward everyone, for no reason at all. And it is this radical love that will heal the world, and ourselves in the process. Amen.