

Beyond Any "Don't" You Can Think Of

Romans 13.8-14 (The Message)

September 4, 2011

"We've splashed our rules all over the sanctuary walls... so many rules we don't have time for dancing... our graffiti defiling the house of God. God's graffiti is different: God writes LOVE upon our hearts. Some night, let's sneak in the sanctuary and paint over the rules and write God's graffiti all over the walls... LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE"

- God's Graffiti, by Ann Weems

Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other "don't" you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love. But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

I have a reputation for preaching sermons on love every time you turn around. I am often heard repeating to anyone who will listen, "God loves you and they ain't a cotton-picking thing you can do about it." Nevertheless, I am obliged to pose a question that doesn't follow from my seemingly unadulterated adoration of love and all things love-like. That is to say, what is it that makes love superior to the law? I'm not playing devil's advocate here... I'm truly not sure I understand the superiority of love over law. In this passage, for example, Paul clearly states that the role of love is merely to complete what the law has intended all along; and that love is a summary statement of the law. In addition, I can think of many life situations in which it would be

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difficult or even impossible to act on the basis of love alone: being seated on a grand felony jury, your kid dealing with a bully on the playground, trying to decide who gets healthcare. Just what is so superior about love? Is there really any difference between law and love? Were Lennon & McCartney right to sing, “All you need is love”?

I was preoccupied with such questions this week in the aftermath of a worship planning session in which they came up quite honestly. As we sought to unravel the relationship between law and love, between justice and love, we found it more and more difficult to envision living in the real world on the basis of love; you know, the world in which you have to stand up for yourself, fend off blows from malicious people, scratch out a meager living for you and your family.

In what way, then, is love superior to law? My reflection yielded two answers that I would like to share with you this morning. They are not clear and definitive answers to the question, but rather food for thought on which I invite you to reflect in the days ahead. The first difference I can find between law and love is that law is detached, objective, and impersonal, whereas love is nothing if not personal. Love is all about relationship; up close and in your face personal. You see, it is possible to subscribe to law, obeying everything it requires, without *touching* the lives of others, seeing and treating them more as things than as children of God. In like manner, we can be obedient to law without ourselves being touched, moved, transformed. Law doesn't necessarily impact how we view ourselves or others.

You can't touch a thing, an object; and people aren't really changed until there is relationship; until things get personal. This is why people who invest themselves in ministry for others manifest love and compassion, and tend to view the import of the ministry with more passion. There are real living, breathing people involved, they find, and there is an urgency to meet their needs. This is true, for example, with our involvement in the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Those who volunteer have more compassion for the people involved than those of us who watch from a distance. This is because it's become personal, it's become real and they realize that these are God's children they're dealing with, not objects described by law.

Think of how different our attitude would be toward, for example, children in Africa who are born HIV positive through no fault of their own. Or, children who are forced marched hundreds of miles in quest of a refugee camp with food, water, and shelter; a march many don't survive. What if situations like these became personal for us? How would we respond to such situations?

We could quote the Old Testament and insist that the sins of the fathers are being visited on the children; in other words, that they are getting what they deserve. Or we could insist that those are Africa's children, and therefore Africa's problem... word to the wise, that avenue has been tried before, and without success. A lawyer once asked Jesus to define neighbor. Who is my neighbor, he asked, and Jesus refused to answer what he considered an absurd question. Anyone in need is your neighbor, he responded, and the only question you need answer is whether you will be a neighbor.

Law tends to be objective, external, distant, rather clinical and dry; but love gets personal and forces us to see that it's God's children we're dealing with. And when it does, love becomes much more powerful than law.

Secondly, law tends to be all about obedience, all about conformity; whereas love is about *transformation*. I can obey all the laws in our community and not become a better person. I can respect all the laws bandied about in church and still not be touched by the Spirit of God. This is the direction Ann Weems takes in today's worship heading. We in the church have a tendency to define ourselves - and evaluate our spiritual maturity - on the basis of what we don't do; on the basis of what we avoid. We write our don'ts all over the place; don't do this ...don't do that ...don't do the other. It's all about obedience without transformation. But when we paint over all those don'ts, we find that love has the power to transform beyond any don't you can think of. We are changed, transformed when we embrace life in love.

Come to think of it, Paul indicated the principal difference between law and love in this passage; I just didn't see it. Love completes law; love fulfills law; love transforms hearts, minds, and spirits where law merely invites obedience. I highly recommend love that reaches beyond law, and I highly recommend we take Ann Weems' advice and sneak into the sanctuary where we have written don't, don't, don't, don't all over the place and paint over it with God's graffiti that only comes in intense, vibrant colors, and is up close and in your face personal: Love, love, love, love.