

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 18
Year A

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

We have a problem in our culture today. We use the word “love” to mean a wide variety of things. We say we love ice cream or our vehicle. We say we love our children and our work. We even use the same word to talk about our relationship with God and our neighbors. Thus, the word “love” loses all meaning.

When Paul uses “love” in his writing, he is discussing a very specific idea that is totally divorced from emotions. As has been mentioned many times, Greek has four words for what we translate as love. Paul uses the word *agape*, which is totally void of emotion. It is a word more closely related to ethics. He can, therefore, equate love with the fulfillment of the law.

Law is another concept with which we have a problem. We have civil law, criminal law, constitutional law, and even canonical or ecclesiastical law. In scripture, the word is used to describe the Ten Commandments, the various commands that appear in the Books of Moses, and as a general term for a major portion of the Hebrew Scriptures – the Law and the Prophets. Like using the term “love”, how we use the term “law” needs to be clear.

Paul is very explicit in his meaning of the word “love”. He lays out several of the Ten Commandments as examples of how we are to love. There is no mistaking emotion here. The commands he quotes are free of emotion – they are ethical imperatives. Paul is trying to show us how love and law interrelate. For him, the law is not a weapon, but a guide in our relationship to God and our neighbor.

What, exactly, is Paul trying to communicate here? How can we be genuine in saying we love our neighbor and our enemy? We give lip service to the idea, but how can we be genuine and not hypocritical? That is what Paul addressed in the reading we had last week when he said we are to provide food and drink for our enemy when they need it. This is a difficult concept for us, but when we actually succeed in doing this, when we try to see life from their point of view, we are approaching the love Jesus requires of us. This is when we live out the command as Paul explains it.

The key is to love others, not with emotions, but with purity of motives. We will begin to see the effect of this in our relationships. We need to focus on the ethics of our interactions, not the emotion of love that we might feel for those close to us. When Jesus tells us to love those who hate us, He is calling on us to rise above the emotions of the moment and to reach out as God would have us. We need to remember that God created all people, even those who disagree with us, and we are, therefore, commanded by God to love them as we love ourselves and our family. That is the law of God.