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Isaiah 30:18-21, Romans 12:9-13 and 13:8-10

The Law of Love

Abington Presbyterian Church

This week, when our country has been riveted by remembering, honoring and celebrating the lives of Aretha Franklin and John McCain, a simple story caught my attention. It's a story of a woman whose husband was near the end of his life and receiving care from hospice. Being Roman Catholic, she had asked their parish priest to come by each day so they could celebrate the Eucharist and receive the sacrament together. After the bread and wine were blessed and shared, she would lean in close to her husband and whisper, "*Food for the journey.*"

What is the food for the journey you need this day?

It may be found in scripture. Paul writes, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." All the rules that are written, all the commandments that have been given, all the do's and don'ts, should's and shouldn'ts, can be summed up in the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself. Love – the ultimate message of Christ. It seems like such a simple idea. Treat others as you wish to be treated. But there really is nothing simple about it. In the end, it's very difficult.

No one can argue that the 10 Commandments aren't good rules to live by. But are they rules we can live by? Can we do all that is written to do and not do all that is written not to do? The answer is no. No one can always be right, or good or pure. I like the way Paul has included in verse 18, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." If it is possible, then do it. Paul knows that no one can live up to all that he has written, but they are given as guidelines. This is a code of ethics set as a path before us. We know we can not stay on the path. God knows that too. But it is there to guide us, as Christians.

Why is it so hard to truly love one another? What holds us back from that type of love? Several things. Love of self gets in the way. Our human nature prompts us to take care of our own needs and desires. We strive for self-gratification. That is part of being human, part of being created. Our desire to "be right" gets in the way. As does fear. We falsely believe that we can only be right if those who don't think, act, dress, talk, or worship like we do are wrong. And if they're not wrong; where does that leave us? Another thing which gets in the way is our limited amount of time and energy. Being open and loving towards others takes both time and energy, and we guard our limited resources in these areas very carefully. The list goes on; the simple notion of loving your neighbor as yourself is incredibly hard to put into practice.

So where does that leave us today? Do we only have a listing of do's and don'ts, summed up by loving one's neighbor, but never truly attainable? Not at all! Our assurance as Christians, our unity as Christians, is the cross. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The cross signifies the love God had for humankind. The cross shows the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins. The cross shows us that our response toward others should be love. And yet when it is not, when we fall short, when we sin, when we don't treat one another with love, the cross also reminds us that our faith in Jesus brings with it forgiveness, made evident in this gift of bread and juice that we share today. This love is indeed our food for the journey.

One of the places I visited in May when I travelled to the Holy Land, is called The Tent of Nations. Owned by the Nassar family of Bethlehem, they have been struggling for years to hold on to their family land. This area of about 100 acres is situated on a fertile hilltop, and is today surrounded by Israeli settlements and construction. The family land was purchased back in 1916, by the grandfather of the current generation, and they have legal documents as proof; yet they are continuing to fight a legal battle in Israeli courts over ownership. Daoud and his older brother, Daher, work the land, and over the years their plight has drawn international attention, so much so that today the land and the hilltop is known as the Tent of Nations. Visitors from all around the world come to hear Daoud speak. Many come to work the land and plant olive trees or grapevines, so that the land is continually worked. The land produces almonds, olives, grapes, figs, wheat, and other crops. On the way up the hilltop, one encounters a stone with these words on it: "We refuse to be enemies." Daoud speaks about how his Christian faith has sustained both him and his family, and how the visitors who come to hear their story provide them with hope. Despite the continued threats, and sometimes the destruction of trees and plants by Israeli settlers, they continue to plant and to work the land. In the midst of such difficult circumstances, their focus is etched in stone – We refuse to be enemies!

Our journey to the table this morning is a journey of love – the love of God for all humanity, the love of Christ for each one of us, and the love between us – not just those here, not just those we know, not just those we like. Love for all humankind. God's law is love.

She leaned close and whispered in his ear.

Food for the journey.