

Scripture: Romans 12:9-13; Matthew 22:34-40
Message: Ripples of Loving
March 29, 2020; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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“Love the Lord your God.” Really? How can we love a God who lets this COVID-19 virus run rampant around the world? How can we love a God who doesn’t protect us from this virus? How can we love a God who seems helpless, or at least doesn’t seem to be doing anything?

Those are some of the questions that come up during a time of pandemic. They are actually questions that come up during any time of tragedy. Where is God in all of this? Why doesn’t he do something? Or maybe he is; maybe he’s sending this as a judgment! Why should I love a God who doesn’t seem to be showing much love right now?

Let me clearly say that I do not believe God is sending this virus as a judgment on the world or on any particular nation. Nor do I agree that God is doing nothing. We live in a world that is affected by sin and we groan with all creation waiting for that time of being delivered from all sickness, pain, weakness and grief. (see Romans 8:18-25)

We can confidently say that God is hurting with a hurting world. The pain and sickness and struggles that hurt us also displease God. He loves this hurting world so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to overcome the power of sin.

At the cross and in the empty grave we see the victory that Jesus won. Death cannot defeat us. We wait and long for that day when the deliverance from sin will be complete. We might wonder why God is waiting so long. But we can know that he loves us and wants us to know the hope of victory.

We see that in the life of Jesus, when he walked on this earth. He cared for those who were suffering. He wept with those who were grieving. He brought hope and victory into the lives of some of those people, as a taste of the complete victory that he would accomplish someday.

Jesus himself experienced suffering, as part of creation’s brokenness. And when he ascended, he sent his followers into the world “as the Father has sent me,” to be God’s agents of comfort and healing.

This is the God we are called to love. In view of God’s mercy, knowing his amazing love to us in Jesus, knowing that he loved us “while we were still sinners” (see Romans 5:8),

we love God.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. That's a lot of love and a lot of ways to love God. That's a love from every part of who we are. It's a love with our heart, from the centre of our being. It's a love with our soul, our very identity. It's a love with our mind, our thoughts and ideas and decisions.

Love your neighbour as yourself. We might be quick to jump to the command to love our neighbour, but we are also expected to love *ourselves*. And why not? *God* loves us. So much that he sent his Son so that we could be his children. "In view of God's mercy," in view of God's love for you, you must also love yourself.

How do you love yourself? You feed yourself and wash yourself and dress yourself and take care of yourself. You practice social distancing and wash your hands often. Those are practical things. To love yourself is also to accept yourself for who you are. It is to love yourself as the dearly loved child of God that you are, warts and all. It is to love yourself with your imperfections, as a work in progress. That gives a good idea of how to love your neighbour as well. How would I like to be treated?

This love for our neighbour is also described in practical ways in our verses from Romans 12. Keep in mind the words from verse 1, "in view of God's mercy." In the context of God's love, your love must be sincere.

The verses of our text repeat words like "one another," along with the words "devoted" and "honour." To be devoted to another person is to desire the welfare of that other person. To be devoted is to be committed to seeing good things happen in the life of another person. We give our attention and time and our self for the benefit of the other person. We do whatever we can for the benefit of another. This devotion is based on love and care and concern for one another.

It is expressed in an attitude of humility, something we have heard before in these verses. "Honour one another above yourselves" (v. 10b). See the other person as most important. See their needs as more important than your own needs. Let your devotion be expressed in such a way that you look out for someone else before yourself.

Practice social distancing, not just for your own health, but for the sake of the other person.

This does not mean that we become a doormat or a passive sufferer or a slave with no

consideration to our own welfare. These words are expressed to each other. As everyone honours each other, the others are held in honour. As each of us see the other as more important, each is held in importance.

The verse continues, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need." It's possible to read this verse to say that we only share with people, or care for people, who are in the church. The "Lord's people" refers to church people. That is one part of the meaning.

We share with one another, helping each other in times of need. That is experienced in many ways, like providing rides, or bringing meals, or providing childcare, or praying for one another, to mention a few examples.

But we do not limit our sharing to only our own church family. The Lord's people are also outside of this particular church. The Lord's people live on the streets and go to the Food Bank. The Lord's people live in the houses on our street. The Lord's people attend other churches, and some don't attend any church. They are people who have needs. And God has blessed us to share with them in their time of need. As we get to know them, we also know their need.

Sharing includes the practice of hospitality. We show hospitality when we welcome the stranger, who might be a refugee from a foreign country. They experience the love and security and blessing that is shared by God's people. We practice hospitality when we invite someone to dinner or for games, or when we serve coffee or tea after Sunday morning worship and when we offer to do the dishes.

These usual practices of hospitality are obviously being set aside right now because of social distancing. But maybe this time of isolation and distance is a reminder of how much we value hospitality, and how important it is to reach out to one another.

The practice of simply doing things together gives the message that the other person is important. Right now, there are some limits on how we typically do things together. There are also creative opportunities to do things together: over the phone, through a video chat, through going for a walk while maintaining the proper distance.

When you act on the opportunity to share with someone and practice hospitality, you might spare them from another humiliating fall into internet pornography because they don't spend the time alone, but instead are going for a walk with you or texting while enjoying a cup of tea.

When you share your time with someone, you might be helping them through the fear and darkness of depression and loneliness. Through your sharing of yourself, that person knows they are not alone, but instead safely in community, even at a distance. As part of a community, they know they are respected and honoured for who they are, not who they have to be or become.

In view of God's mercy, love one another. Love the Lord your God with all that you are and your neighbour as yourself. Consider these words as directing us in two ways: To look up, and to look around.

Look up. Love God, because he is the only God there is. There is no other god who has power to make the world or care for it. There is no other god who can take care of us. God is the one true God. Look up, and believe. Knowing God as the only God, we respect him and use his name with respect. We worship God and think about him every day. We thank him for food at our meals. We trust him to take care of us. Look up, and honour the one, true God.

Look around. Love your neighbour. Love your family members and say kind words to them. Love your friends and encourage them. Share God's blessings with those around us. Look around and see the people around you as your neighbours. These are people that we love and care for.

Look up, know God and be like him.

Look around, to be the presence of Christ to others.

Look up, and realize how we are not like God. Confess sins. Commit to being more like him.

Look around, see the cross and forgiveness. We don't live with the guilt of sin, but we see the love of God to forgive us.

Look up, see what God has done. He has paid for our sins. He has adopted us into his family. We are his sons and daughters.

Look around, see how we can help others know and experience this love of God.

From our love for God who loves us flows the love we have for one another.

When there is much fear and uncertainty and many questions, may we bring the blessing of God's love into the lives of our neighbours.

To the glory of God.

Amen.