

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time “A” Corpus Christi 2011

Romans 13:8-10

Most of us know what it is to be in debt. There is the mortgage on the house, the note against the car, the time payment plan at the department store, not to mention our proportionate share of the national debt.

As if these were not enough, today’s second reading from Romans reminds us of another debt. But this is a different kind of debt, one we can accept with gladness because it has the power to lift and enrich life. Saint Paul calls it our debt of love.

I. He says that love is first a debt that we owe ourselves. Our text states it clearly, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” That may sound strange to us at first, because we are familiar with the scriptural emphasis on humility.

Jesus repeatedly admonished his followers to “deny themselves.” Yet we find it written in the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the epistles that our love of others is to be proportioned to our love of self.

Now, this obviously is not an inducement to self-centeredness. Neither Jesus nor Paul is encouraging us to a Narcissist kind of self-love.

You might remember the story of Narsissis from Greek mythology. He was a very handsome young man who courted and won the affections of most of the women of the kingdom. Then, after he had won them, he would turn his back, walk away, leaving them heartbroken and alone.

Finally, one of these grief stricken maidens prayed to her pagan god that Narcissis would experience the same kind of sorrow as he inflicted on the women of the realm.

Her prayer was answered when one day Narcissis stooped to drink from a clear pool of water. There he saw the reflection of his own handsome face, fell in love with himself, and pined away in an unrequited love. This, obviously, is not the meaning of our text. What then does it mean?

Well, it is just sound psychology. For the truth is that there is no way for us to have a good relationship with anyone or anything else in the world until first we come to terms with ourselves.

A lack of self-respect and self-acceptance is a deep and basic problem with ourselves. One man confesses that the most unpleasant task he had to face all day long was shaving in the morning.

Then he explained, "Because," said he, "I find it almost impossible to look myself in the face that long." The man had lost respect for himself.

There is one person in this world that you can never escape. There may be many people whom you find periodically unpleasant, but most of them are occasionally avoidable. You can go to work and get away from your family.

You can go home and get away from your boss. You can send the children to school and get away from them, or you can go off to school and get away from your parents.

But there is one person in this world that you can never escape, one person with whom you will have to live throughout the darkest hours of the night and the longest eon of eternity. Everywhere you go that person will be present. Go to work, he'll be there. Go to school, he'll be there. Go to bed, he'll be there.

And that one person is you. In the light of that undeniable truth, doesn't it just make sense to be the kind of person and build the kind of life that you can respect and admire and enjoy being around?

I heard a story one time about a man who was a construction foreman for a wealthy financier. The financier furnished the money, and the foreman furnished the know-how. Together they were in the building business.

One day the financier called the foreman into his office. He explained that he would be out of the city for a while and that while he was gone

he wanted a house build.

He said, “Here are the plans, and I have deposited in the local bank under your signature the amount needed to build the house.” The foreman took the plans, left the office and started to think. He said to himself, “This could be my opportunity. I know the building business. I can trim some corners, save some money, put it in my pocket, and no one will ever be the wiser.

He made up his mind and that was what he did. Pouring the foundation he used the cheapest labor and the cheapest material. Roughing in the plumbing, he used the cheapest labor and the cheapest material. When he was finished, he had cut the cost a third, put that in his pocket and said, “No one will ever know.”

His boss came home, and together they went to view the house. After a while the financier said, “I didn’t tell you this before I left; I wanted it to be a surprise. You have served me long and well, and I wanted to show my appreciation.

This is your house. Here is the key; you build it, you live in it.” In the month ahead the poorly constructed house mocked him and jeered, you cheated yourself.”

You too are in the building business. And if you build your life out of cheap and shabby materials, and some day an empty hull of life will look you in the eye and mock and jeer and say, “You cheated yourself.” This is what the debt of love means when it says that you must first love yourself.

II

. The second part of the debt is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. For most of us that is a sizable order. We are so wrapped up in ourselves that we have very little time to really care about anyone or anyone else. Yet the directive is plain: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

How come? Why should we really care about anyone other than ourselves? Let me ask you this: How many things do we enjoy today because someone else has made a contribution to our lives? How many of us can stand up and say, “This is my life, and I hold a clear title. I don’t owe anything to anybody?”

A little honest reflection in this area could bring all of us to an illuminating discovery. Our lives are not private corporations. They are stock companies, and there are many stock holders.

What I mean is this: Across the years there are literally hundreds of people who have taken a little bit of themselves and invested it in you. We are what we are because someone cared enough and given enough to help us along the way.

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote a poem about Ulysses. Ulysses in mythology was an explorer. He sailed the seven seas. After extensive travel and experience, he returned home to confess, “I am a part of all that I have met.” And the same confession belongs to us all.

Any achievement that is ours in life is not ours alone. It is not simply the product of personal ability and effort. It is also a composite of the contributions of family and friends and neighbors and teachers and a thousand people whose names we will never know.

So when Paul writes, “Owe no debt to anyone except the debt that binds us to love one another”, he was speaking not only as a Christian theologian. He was speaking also as a practical economist.

He knew that there is no way we can ever pay that debt. The best we can ever hope for is a little interest on the loan. And one of the most sobering questions we will ever have to answer is this: “What sort of dividend are we paying the stockholders in our lives?”

“Love your neighbor as you love yourselves.”