

**SUMMED UP**  
**Romans 13:8-10**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on September 10, 2017, the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

I.

While I am no Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn, I grew up in Memphis, a city on the Mississippi River, and being near and often crossing this mighty river marked significant passages in my life.

- As a child seated in the backseat of a station wagon, we could cross the Mississippi about one weekend a month to visit grandparents who lived on the other side in Arkansas, knowing that when we awoke from the trip, candy and kisses would await.
- Once a year we would cross the Mississippi to travel north to Belleville, Illinois, where we would stay with relatives, and then cross it again at least once during the weekend to watch the St. Louis Cardinals play baseball.
- When I was in high school, a new bridge was being built to span the river; the father of one of my classmates was a lead developer of the project; he arranged for our class picture to be taken with us standing on the edge of the unfinished bridge, the city’s skyline in the background. Society was less litigious in those days!
- I crossed the river every semester headed to the freedom of college life; and home every holiday for familiarity and family.
- I crossed it on an early morning bus ride to sit with my father at Methodist Hospital for what turned out to be his last home, his last week of life.
- And I crossed the Mississippi in a Ryder Truck three days after I graduated from seminary in New York headed to ordination in Texas and everything that I had prepared for up to that point in my life.

Lionel Trilling, a reader of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*<sup>1</sup> more astute than my high school reading of that classic, sees the river as the source of Huck’s “moral passion.” Trilling writes:

Huck is at odds...with the only form of *established* religion he knows, and his very intense moral life may be said to derive almost *wholly from his love of the river.*

He lives in perpetual *adoration* of the Mississippi’s power and charm...

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885.



We know from the Beatles that “all you need is love,”<sup>4</sup> and from Jackie DeShannon that “what the world needs now is love sweet love”<sup>5</sup>; but what is it about “a strong brown god,” or the God who made the Mississippi River (and all rivers), the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Christ in whose name we gather, who is the Spirit whose presence we invoke that compels to this one simple and positive four-letter word -- *love*? Let me take a stab at taking us deeper than simply saying: “We should love one another.”

### III.

Whenever I am working within the Bible and seek not to just skim over the surface or say what has already been said before, I spend time thinking about each word in the text, or I consult with a writer or theologian whose writing helps take me to a deeper place. That is what led me to Trilling and Huck Finn and T. S. Eliot. But get at the passage itself, I turned to Karl Barth who in his commentary on Romans wrote on this passage – this word “love” – that is before us.<sup>6</sup> Barth has a great if not dense way of pointing to the God who lies behind and beneath what we experience or label as love, in the way that the Mississippi River lies behind and beneath all Huck Finn is and does – “a strong brown god...waiting and watching.” So follow me closely and I will share just a bit of what Barth says about love as it appears in this passage.

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A first set of sayings<sup>7</sup> that Barth provides classifies love as *revolutionary*. “Love of one another,” he says, “ought to be undertaken as the *protest* against the course of this world.” Barth calls love the “great positive possibility”

- That is *not conformed* to this world
- That bears witness from within this world to the *strangeness* of God
- That is revolutionary in the sense that it leads us to do the *new* by which the *old* is overturned.

One of the early memories I have of being a young person in the church is leaving home on Christmas Eve to join another church’s youth group to take gifts to children confined in an inner city public hospital. Not just gifts to a *local* hospital. Not just gifts delivered *a day or two* before Christmas when no well-choreographed family activities to be interfered with. But a bunch of suburban kids delivering gifts to an inner city hospital where the kids didn’t look like them or go to school with them or have the future they would have. “Why don’t you want to have dinner with your own family?” parents said. “What are your youth leaders thinking?” “Haven’t you heard that charity begins at home?” Yet love is

- *Not conformed* to this world
- Bears witness to the *strangeness* of God
- The *new* by which the *old* is overturned.

There is something appealing about a revolution, about the new by which the old is overturned.

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<sup>4</sup> The Beatles, “All You Need Is Love,” from *Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967; available at <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beatles/allyouneedislove.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love,” words by Hal David, music by Burt Bacharach, (1965). Available at [https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&q=what+the+world+needs+now+lyrics&oq=what+the+world+&gs\\_l=psy-ab.1.1.0i20k112j012.1367.3124.0.5872.16.15.0.0.0.121.1259.11j3.14.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..2.14.1253.0..35i39k1j0i131k1j0i67k1.ReGDtDtcLeQ](https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&q=what+the+world+needs+now+lyrics&oq=what+the+world+&gs_l=psy-ab.1.1.0i20k112j012.1367.3124.0.5872.16.15.0.0.0.121.1259.11j3.14.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..2.14.1253.0..35i39k1j0i131k1j0i67k1.ReGDtDtcLeQ).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

<sup>7</sup> The quotes to follow, in the next two sections, come from Barth 492-497.

A second set of phrases Barth uses to describe “love” points to our religious faith in “a strong brown god,” or a God even more personal and Trinitarian than Huck’s. Barth says that love is:

- *Beyond* even the *conceivable* possibility of any *concrete* or *analyzable* experience of the relationship between God and humanity.
- Thus, for Barth, love lies *beyond* the religious *laws* we seek to follow and the religious *practices* in which we engage, beyond our prayers, our attending worship, our presenting our tithes and offerings. Love is beyond all these.

So in our terminology, love is *religious* to be sure, but it is also *greater* than the religious experiences we have or practices that grow out of our experience. Barth says that love is “the presupposition” of all that we can observe and analyze and label:

- It is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- It is the way by which we know and experience God
- It is the way we lay hold of God and cling to God, the way God lays hold to us and clings to us.

The way of love lies beyond even our highest experiences of beauty. This is why Huckleberry Finn always returns to the river. It was his god. It was his religion. It was what lay behind all his capacity for love. It was the supposition behind all his moral passion. Even while love is beyond religion, it is religious in the best sense of the word.

#### IV.

As we begin this church year, we gather today at the Table of our Lord. It is an experience many of us have had before—if we are Catholic as the Mass, if we have been in other Protestant Churches it goes by the name Communion, Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper. Like “love,” like God, this gathering at Table goes by many names. Like the river, it is a gathering in which love is central:

- God’s love for us through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ.
- Our love for God through our commitment to go forth from this Table and serve Christ in the church and world.
- Our love for one another as we stand as equals before God, young and old, rich and poor, born in this land and born in other lands, receiving the same blessing, partaking of the same wine, breaking the same bread.

One of the most important theological books I have ever read ends with lines from a George Herbert poem that bears witness to the incomprehensible love of God that drapes this Table like a white tablecloth. Herbert writes:

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine  
Which my God feels as blood, and I as wine.<sup>8</sup>

In the mystery of who God is, drink this wine, break this bread, receive and share this love. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 173. The Herbert line is from “The Agony,” found in *The Poetical Works Of George Herbert*, ed. George Gilfillan. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1853). Available at [http://www.ritchies.net/Herbert/poems/031\\_The\\_Agony.htm](http://www.ritchies.net/Herbert/poems/031_The_Agony.htm).