

Sermon on Romans 13:8–10

Gustaf Wingren

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(a) Communion service during a continuing-education course for priests in Oslo, August 1981

[Fagerborg kirke, Thursday 27/8]

(b) High Mass in Djursholm Chapel, Sunday 13 September 1981, the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, which has Romans 13:8–10 as the third-series text for Evensong

Text: Romans 13:8–10

Hymns: 421:1–3; 332:4–6; 66:1–2; 299:1–3; 40:4–5 [not “the Creed hymn” [?]]

Read as: (1) Epistle, 1 John 4:7–10 (“the Evangelist John”), the second-series Epistle; (2) Gospel, Matthew 5:43–48 (“the Evangelist Matthew”), the second-series Gospel for High Mass; the Creed; (3) sermon text, Romans 13:8–10, the third-series text for Evensong on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

There is a chapter in the letter to the Romans that is notorious: “Romans 13.” “The authority does not bear the sword in vain...” “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”

In the notorious thirteenth chapter of Romans, the apostle Paul has set out how a Christian is to behave as a member of society. It is there he says that one is to “obey the authorities.” And by this he means: “Here I have set down certain duties that can be fulfilled to the last point. Here you can be perfect and owe nothing. The law is to have nothing to strike at here — nothing! Give to everyone what you owe, give to each one what he is due: taxes, tolls, respect, honor.” That takes a couple of sentences. But then Paul goes on, and this is our text today: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another. For whoever loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law. The commandments ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not kill,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and every other commandment are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love is therefore the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8–10, in the new Swedish translation). It is the third-series text for Evensong on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity.

God, write these words in our hearts.

Sometimes one needs to stop and think: “What I am doing now — it is lawful, isn’t it?” People who work in public life especially, and perhaps do so amid conflicts with other wills, must feel their way and make sure that not the slightest objection can be raised against them. And it is not particularly hard to live like that, to be beyond reproach. It works perfectly well. That means I owe nothing. Paul demands this of the Christians in Rome, in the capital, who have the highest authority of the empire right on top of them. “Give to everyone — to the toll collectors, the tax authorities, and so on — give them what you owe them, every penny. See to it that no one has the slightest little thing to object to.”

Then his words take a strange turn, just where our text begins. When it comes to love for one’s fellow human beings, one can never be out of debt. There one is always in debt. It is strange. Here too we are in a purely earthly setting. When we close our eyes we remember the faces of the people around us. We know what they are like, these people in our outward world, with all their faults, all their peculiarities. I can never be out of debt. Something is always expected of me that I do not give. Everywhere, in someone, there is a joy that goes out, because of me. There is always a face that could have shone — if I had been different. I.

To be, in one earthly area — in relation to the paragraphs of the law — totally without guilt, absolutely beyond reproach, and at the same time, in another area just as earthly — in relation to the people I meet — always to owe something, and not to be able to give it, not to give enough: that is a strange doubleness. Yet we recognize it. It is an experience we carry within us. The paragraphs of the law are the same for all of us — these paragraphs before which we can stand owing nothing. The faces, the human faces that flicker past within us, are different. Each of us has his own faces to remember. No one is out of debt.

Now there is more: Paul says that the whole law, the sum of everything in the law, lies in this one relationship, the relationship to the neighbor. The Old Testament law does speak, commandment after commandment, of the neighbor, “the one nearest.” But there is something else there all the same — God, and God’s name — and it stands at the beginning, in “the commandments of the first table,” as the catechism says. So in the Gospels “the law and the prophets” are summed up in two commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God...” — and that is a long commandment: “with all your heart,” “with all your soul.” Only after that “comes a commandment like it”: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But Paul — and it is he, after all, who is teaching us here in the text — Paul sets the whole law, the whole of it, on one single point: the neighbor, the fellow human being. He does it here, in Romans 13:9–10. He does it in Galatians 5:14: “The whole law is fulfilled in one word, one: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Here is an everyday world, full of people — and it is the whole law. You do not need to read the Bible to get law! On the contrary, go out into the world, and the law streams over you. And it is God’s law. It cries out from these faces we see — at this moment, before our inner eye — faces that all ask for something, that all appeal to us for something.

The New Testament letters contain, in some places, long lists of exhortations (there is a learned word for them, “paraenesis”). “Bless those who persecute you, do not repay evil for evil, give to the one who asks of you,” and so on. It is remarkable how little of all this has to do with “devotion,” or with something I do in stillness, for myself. The exhortations send us off in a definite direction each time. They give us a push: “Off you go, off you go — the fellow human being — there is something [?] there, a need. There you have a job that will keep you busy!”

In the history of the church it came about that these “exhortations” were put into the Epistle texts that were preached on in former times at the early morning service, at “matins” — that was at dawn every Sunday. So we know, for example, how Martin Luther preached on these texts. “Now we come to the works,” he said. “And these works are not ours. We are not to think them up in order to become ‘better’ by them. Works, if they are good, can never become ‘qualities’ that cling to us. The works described in ‘the Epistles’ are gift-goodness [?] that lies there and has an address. They are to go off. They are to be sent away from us to our fellow human being, and end up there, and stay there.” That is the one thing Luther says about the exhortations in the New Testament. The other is at least as important — perhaps more important.

In terms of language, these exhortations are moral rules, actions that ought to be carried out. When I hear them, I am set going to do something. But if I listen carefully — sit there on Sunday morning, at matins, and listen — then these same words, the exhortations, draw a picture. They draw the picture of a human being who actually does all this — yes, who has done all this. Taken together, they are pictures of Jesus Christ, here in the throng of the world. “Bless those who persecute you” — the crucifixion, and in the midst of the crucifixion his word: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” “Do not repay evil for evil” — the whole of Jesus’ way in Jerusalem in the last week. And so it goes, all the way through, word for

word. What ought to be a moral challenge — and is that too — becomes at the same time a description of events that have taken place, that have taken shape in flesh and blood, down in this throng of events and people that we live in now.

Love, which according to Paul in our text is “the fulfilling of the law” — love we see before us. It is realized. We see it brought up onto the cross, exposed to its utmost trial, and yet not ceasing to be what it is, namely love: the very thing we fall short of. Given out to the last drop of life, and to the last moment.

He did not end up “in debt” for anything when it came to giving. But we are in debt. We know that we are in debt. We know that we have not given what we ought to have given. We cannot claim to stand free of debt before the picture of him, the one who was given out.

When we see this clearly and do not start defending ourselves, then we are inside [a pastoral-care procedure?] that is called “confession.” And at the same time we are, for once, truly apostolic in our hearts. We are as the apostles were on the evening of Good Friday, when he had gone the way to the end and was dead, while they had fled and were alive. In this apostolic darkness — right there — God creates anew. On the third day Jesus woke up, living, and met them. He spoke to those who had fled, restored them, and took them into service for a new life. That is called “absolution.” It takes place through a word that is called “gospel,” and that is sent out, from the day of the resurrection on, to hold good in the world as long as the world stands — the word that lifts off the debt, so that it no longer lies on us and no longer weighs us down. [illegible]

If you desire the forgiveness of your sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, then, by the power of God’s word and promise, it is firm and certain that God by grace forgives you all your sins. And this forgiveness of your sins I declare to you by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, who was and is and shall be one true God, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen.

So: to receive that gift, we are here, in the service.

Let us pray.

God, we come before you with all that we have not done. We come with all that is missing in our lives — and so is missing in the lives of other people, those who met us and did not

receive what we ought to have given them. You, O God, are their God. Give them all good things. Have mercy on us too. Blot out the debt from our consciences for Jesus Christ's sake, and take us again into service for work in your world. Amen.

Translator's notes. This sermon survives only in Wingren's manuscript, which was read directly: struck-out words are omitted, words written between the lines are taken in, and the marginal cue words "TEXTEN" and "ABSOLUTION" are left out. "Skuld" is rendered "debt" throughout, since the sermon turns on owing and being out of debt; in Swedish the same word also means guilt. The partly struck line after "tynger" (weighs down) cannot be read and is marked [illegible]. The uncertain readings "gåvogodhet" (gift-goodness), "någe/något" (something), and "en själavårds..." are marked [?]. The bare "Jag." ("I.") at the end of the paragraph on faces stands alone in the manuscript and is kept as written. The heading note [ej "Troshymnen"] is uncertain and is kept with [?].

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·