

Love is all you need?

Romans 13:8-14

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 10, 2017

Video preceding sermon... 156 countries sing together "All You Need is Love!" by the Beatles, from the Starbucks Love Project Global Sing Along. Available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2DvB9BuHGg>

I consider it one of my sacred parental duties to make sure that my children are culturally literate. Therefore, I recently made a point of introducing the kids to the now infamous "More Cowbell" sketch that originally aired on Saturday Night Live in the year 2000.¹ Presented as a parody of the VH1 documentary series *Behind the Music*, the sketch has now become a part of our cultural landscape, and thus I wanted to make sure that Shylah and Tristan understood the context when I randomly made references to needing "more cowbell."

Now for the few of you who have no idea what I am talking about, a brief summary: The sketch fictionalizes the recording of the song "Don't Fear The Reaper" by Blue Öyster Cult. It featured Christopher Walken as legendary music producer "Bruce Dickinson" and Will Ferrell as a fictional cowbell player Gene Frenkle. During recording, Frenkle's overzealous playing annoys his bandmates but pleases Dickinson, who keeps popping into the studio to announce that he needs more cowbell.

Near the end of the sketch, after the predictable climactic conflict, Dickinson exclaims, "I've got a fever, and the only prescription is more cowbell!" And thus the band comes together again, and the sketch fades out with Gene Frenkle playing his flamboyant cowbell with a great big smile on his face.

Last year, during the rancorous presidential election cycle, one of the few moments of levity I enjoyed came when I ran across a satirical political poster promoting Christopher Walken for president with the tag-line "...because what America needs is more cowbell!" It is just these types of references that I want my children to be able to understand. Partly, just because I want them to share the joke. But also because I truly want them to be able to appreciate the commentary that almost always accompanies social satire.

I don't know if the apostle Paul had a sense of humor or not. I admit that there is little evidence to suggest that he did in the letters we have preserved in the New Testament. But if he did, then I would hope he would get the joke, and hear the commentary buried beneath the satire. Because there is little doubt that our world has a fever. But Paul has a prescription, and while it isn't more cowbell, it is just as simple. It is summed up in the quote from psychiatrist Karl Menninger that heads our bulletin today. And it was beautifully illustrated in the video we just saw featuring the classic Beatles song "All you Need is Love." In Paul's words, "when you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along;"² "love is the fulfilling of the law."³

¹ Available: <http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/more-cowbell-with-will-ferrell-on-snl-video-saturday-night-live-nbc/3506001?snl=1>

² Romans 13:8b, *The Message*.

³ Romans 13:10b, *NRSV*

So Paul agrees – all you need is love. And he is in no way unique in the scriptures. Jesus himself said as much when he was tested by the Pharisees, who asked him to name which commandment in the law is the greatest. He replied by quoting two different texts in the Torah – Deuteronomy 6:5 – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and Leviticus 19:18 – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments, he says, hang all the law and the prophets.⁴ Again, all you need is love.

But this begs the question – Really? Could it really be that easy? Isn't this actually just hyperbole, a dramatic over-simplification of the law meant to make a point? Could it be that all these voices telling us that all you need is love are just as satirical as Bruce Dickinson's plea for more cowbell – making us feel better for a moment, and perhaps more equipped to endure the trials and tribulations of this life, but in the end actually doing very little to change our reality? I believe that only experience can answer these questions. And so, a few brief and true stories:

Mark Lowry, was a 13 year old 7th grader at Cross Lutheran School, in Yorkville, Illinois who was diagnosed with leukemia. By the end of the week when his classmates learned that Mark would be undergoing chemotherapy and losing his hair, only two of the sixteen 7th and 8th grade boys at his school were not bald. One of them was waiting for the weekend for his haircut. The other was Mark, who came home from his first treatment with a full head of hair. The boys were asked by a reporter how long they planned to go hairless as a show of solidarity with their classmate. "Until Mark grows his hair back" was the unanimous response.⁵

Many years ago, when a famine was bringing misery in Russia, the writer Leo Tolstoy passed by a bridge in Moscow where many beggars gathered. They were on the verge of starvation and were asking for alms. Seeing a beggar, Tolstoy searched in his pocket for a coin, but discovered that he had nothing with him, not even a copper coin. Embarrassed, Tolstoy took the beggar's hands in his own and said, "I am sorry, brother. Don't be angry with me. I have nothing with me today." The thin face of the beggar became illuminated, and he said in reply, "But you called me brother - that was a great gift, sir."⁶

About two years ago, our congregation was visited by some of the leaders of EYN – the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Hearing of the hardships they had endured, and the suffering of the church and the people in Nigeria as their homeland was being ravaged by Boko Haram, one of our members was moved to do something to help. So she organized a yard sale for their benefit. The church and community pitched in, and \$7000 was raised and sent to aid our sisters and brothers in Nigeria.

⁴ Matthew 22:34-40, *NRSV*

⁵ From an AP clipping, quoted in “Love Makes the Ride Worthwhile.” Animating Illustrations. *Homiletics Online*: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2942

⁶ -Ronald E. Vallet, *Stepping Stones of the Steward* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 129. Quoted in “Love in Seven Minutes.” Animating Illustrations. *Homiletics Online*: http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=3121

Finally, I want to share a story from Wesley Taylor, of the Tualatin United Methodist Church, in Oregon. In his own words:

He worked his sons so hard. In midsummer, when the corn had grown too high to plow, most farmers laid it by and went fishing. My father never knew when it was time to go fishing. When our corn was beyond the point of cultivation, my father sharpened a hoe for each of his sons and sent us to the field.

One August morning I was hoeing and hating in a terrible combination. There was one thing I was sure of: My father couldn't love me and at the same time ask me to do this awful task. My plans were laid. When the noontime sun reached its zenith I would declare my freedom. At the dinner table I announced my intention: "Papa, I'm not going to hoe corn for anyone this afternoon. It's too hot." He smiled and said simply, "Is that so?" (which meant that I was going to hoe corn).

That afternoon found me hoeing corn. About a third of the way up the row, I stopped, cropped my hoe, took out my handkerchief and wiped the sweat and the tears. Then I looked up the row. The weeds were thick and heavy. I knew my father didn't love me. Then I saw him. My father! Hoeing corn down my row and in his arthritic hands I knew that every stroke of that hoe meant a streak of pain.

Soon we met in the middle of the field. Papa and I sat down. It was one of those moments in my life that will stretch into eternity.⁷

The scriptures tell us that “we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another...[and] God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.”⁸

So you be the judge – is love all we need?

Paul would have us answer now, because the moment is urgent.

The day is near and the time is now.

The world has a fever, and the only prescription that we know of...is more love.

⁷ Quoted in “Love in Seven Minutes.” Animating Illustrations. *Homiletics Online*: http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=3121

⁸ 1st John 3:16 and 4:9.