

The Ties That Bind

Exodus 12: 1-14

Romans 13: 8-14

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Exodus 12: 1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Romans 13: 8-14

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.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

In my seminary UCC History and Polity class we were assigned a paper that was to answer two questions. How are we the *United* Church of Christ? And, how are we the *Untied* Church of Christ? The goal of the paper was to see how we were bound together, tied together, as a denomination that had come together from four distinct strands of Christian theology and history, and to also see that there is room for a broad range of beliefs and practices among us.

Being one uniting church was not a narrow path as we follow the message in John's Gospel, "That they may all be one." Ultimately the ties that bind us together in unity are the essentials, and we are *untied* to welcome diversity in the nonessentials.

It is essential that we gather at the Communion table to celebrate the sacrament, remembering Jesus and all that he did for us. What is nonessential is what type of bread we share, or if we use wine or grape juice, or how often we observe Communion.

It is essential that we gather for worship, to offer our praise and our prayers. What is nonessential is where we gather, or just how we offer our praise and our prayers.

It is essential that we love our neighbor as ourselves. What is nonessential is just how that love is shared and expressed.

How are we *united*? How are we *untied*? These two questions are worth exploring well beyond our denomination. What are the ties that bind us together, yet how loose can those ties be so that our own journeys, beliefs, and practices are welcomed, and know that we still belong?

We can take these questions all the way back to the earliest days of our faith ancestors, as they were united in following God's ordinance to observe the Passover as a perpetual festival of remembrance of their liberation from Egyptian slavery. There were--there are-- many clear, explicit and detailed steps in celebrating Passover so that the work of gaining freedom has never lost its taste. Symbolism and meaning that reenact the passing over of the Israelites forever tells the story of God's concern for those who are suffering, and of God's caring presence. The Israelites then, and the Jewish people now, are *united* across time in a communal, sacred ritual of urgency, readiness and participation in their own liberation. They are *untied* in whether they chose a sheep or a goat, or if they shared the sacrifice with another family, and over time how some of the symbolism and practices have evolved and taken on new meaning.

We too, as Christians, are *united* to our faith ancestors each time we celebrate the sacrament of Communion. We gather in remembrance of Jesus and share the meal that he shared with his disciples at a Passover feast. We are united with other Christians in our communal, intentional ritual of memory, of remembering and celebrating all that Jesus did for us, as we share in the bread and cup. Symbolism and meaning that embodies Christ's last supper, his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and joyfully his resurrection forever tells the story of God's loving concern for those who are suffering, for those without hope in the darkness and of God's indwelling presence. We are united across time in a communal, sacred ritual of healing our brokenness, of God's greatest expression of love, and as the Psalmist wrote, "to taste and see that the Lord is good."

How we are *united*, how we are *untied*, is also a question for faith communities today. Paul tells us that the only thing we should owe to one another is love, that we are to love our neighbor as our self, as that is the fulfilling of the law. He emphasizes this with a sense of urgency, a sense of urgency not unlike what our faith ancestors experienced at the Passover, and is now recreated every time the holiday festival is observed and tasted. "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." Now is always the right time to act in love, to awaken to God's dawning light.

Many religions have a form of the Golden Rule--to do unto others as you would have done unto you—in that truth we are indeed *united*. Buddhism teaches 'Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.' Judaism teaches 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.' Hinduism teaches 'This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you.' Islam teaches 'Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for

yourself.’ And in the wisdom of an In Cast conversation last year, we talked about how the Platinum Rule even supersedes the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others as they would want done to them,’ for in this way there can be no harm, or assumption or even wrong thinly disguised as love.

Each of these rules lifts up the importance of love as the law's fulfilment. Yet at the same time they refuse to set up a lengthy to-do list of ‘oughts,’ ‘shoulds’ or ‘musts’ as we are to be *united* in the essentials of fulfilling the law of love, and *untied* in the non-essentials of loving our neighbor as our self. The kind of love that Jesus modeled for us and that Paul taught us to practice is a kind of love that simply gives to another person, without any wish to get anything in return.

For some this love is expressed by holding people and their situations in daily prayer for hope, strength and encouragement; for others this is about participating in marches and rallies that seek to challenge the status quo for a more loving and just world, for others it is shown in bread baked and meals delivered to those who live with food insecurity, and for yet others, love is a gift that pays a bill or fills a gas tank or buys diapers for someone who just cannot afford it when needed.

Our unity is a wonderful, creative, faithful and timeless story of being *united* yet *untied* in the ties that bind us together in love, in the fellowship of kindred minds like that above, as we share mutual woes and bear one another’s burdens. Amen.