

Ezekiel 33:7-9

Psalm 95

Romans 13:8-10

Matthew 18:15-20

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We have all heard the saying, “You can’t see the forest for the trees.” and most of us have experienced that phenomenon in many facets of our lives. For me, it happened most often back in my high school and college years while I would be trying to solve long and involved math and engineering problems. I would put great effort in working each step of a problem, but would sometimes fail to recognize whether the final answer made sense. So, I could occasionally come up with an absurd answer – like calculating the distance from the earth to the moon to be less than the distance between Fort Worth and Dallas. And showing that I have still not completely outgrown that tendency to let trees obscure the forest, I have lightbulbs in my closet – more lightbulbs than I will likely be able to use over the remainder of my lifetime. But, they were a bargain.

In our second reading today, Saint Paul is reminding us that we sometimes miss the forest for the trees in our faith as well. We can pay so much attention to rules, or the law as Paul puts it, that we fail to recognize their true intent, which is to show us the way to love God and our neighbor. Paul says it clearly and succinctly in the last line of this reading, “...love is the fulfillment of the law,” just as Jesus made it very clear in teaching that the greatest and first commandment is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and the second is like it, “You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.” In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus adds, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Both Jesus and Paul cite the Old Testament Book of Leviticus as their source for the commandment to love our neighbor. An ancient rabbi, Hillel, had similar insight when he wrote that love of neighbor is the whole Torah. The rest, he said, is commentary.

We need to remember that the commandment to love our neighbor is not just sending us into a feel-good Hallmark moment. Like all books of the New Testament, Paul’s letters are translated from Greek, which uses three words for love. *Philia* is the love of friendship and family. *Eros* is romantic love. But Paul uses the third word, *agape*, which emulates God’s love for humanity. It calls us to love without limits; to put the needs of others, including strangers, before our own. It requires that we make ourselves aware of the needs of others and respond to those needs. The demands of *agape* are great, but the rewards are even greater.

Love of neighbor is not limited to the commandments that Paul cites in today’s second reading. I cannot simply sit back and say, “well, I have not committed adultery, have not killed anyone, did not steal from anyone, have not coveted anyone or anything, so I am good.” Instead, we have to examine everything we say and do in our lives against the incredibly high standard of *agape*, of God’s love for humanity. Love of neighbor calls us to end, once and for all, the sin of racism and to reject bigotry and hate in all their ugly forms. Love of neighbor calls us to find ways to welcome strangers rather than find excuses to keep them away or send them

home. Love of neighbor calls us to seek out those who are suffering, no matter who or where they are or what the cause, and give them comfort. The amount of suffering in our world today is staggering – famine and genocide in Africa and the Middle East; massive destruction and flooding from hurricanes along the Texas and Louisiana coast, the Caribbean, Florida, and Mexico; chronic poverty and homelessness everywhere. Millions of our sisters and brothers need help, and the commandment to love our neighbor demands that we give it. Today's second collection is one of many ways to do that. Let us all be generous, today and beyond, as long as others are suffering.