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The Law of Love
 Romans 13:8-12

The New York Times Magazine published a story last weekend called *Love in the City*. Photographers were sent to every borough of the city in search of love. The story shows a couple for each hour of the day, and chronicles a wide spectrum of love. The result is captivating, not only because it shows the wild diversity of one of the greatest cities in the world. It also shows the quixotic search for intimacy in the midst of the crowd – the public privacy that is so common in a city of so many people. The images show hands held on subway cars, kisses on the Staten Island ferry and in Central Park; couples in cabs, clubs, and street corners. The journalist who compiled the piece writes, “in New York, our vastly different joys and regrets attach to the same landscape...every staircase and streetlamp is alive with infinite histories.”¹

The beauty of this piece is that it shows the particularity of love for 24 different couples – a Muslim couple (husband and wife) praying together at 5 am; two men taking a break from walking home from the club in the wee hours of the morning. The photos show young love, unrequited love, couples who have been together for a long time, and lovers who hardly know each other at all. The result is a portrait of a city where almost anything goes, where people reach for one another in defiance of the loneliness that comes from being alone in the crush of the crowd.

New York is interesting. Any place with that volume of people has to have laws – common norms that govern life together, and New York is no exception. But legal code has a hard time keeping up with the pace of social change. You can eat authentic dim sum at 4 in the morning in a gold lame bikini if you want to but you can’t walk around with an ice cream cone in your pocket on Sundays. You can find the latest fashion and get away with wearing almost nothing, but it’s illegal to wear slippers after 10 PM. You can go speed dating to find a mate in a pool of 100 strangers, but you might have to pay a \$25 fine for flirting.²

Some strange laws are still on the books in New York. And not only there – everywhere humans have organized themselves into communities, we’ve had laws to govern our communal relationships. My father is a lawyer, I’m a Presbyterian – I appreciate rules that help us live peaceably together. But societies change, and the legal code doesn’t always change with it. Early civilizations are particularly interesting, because religion and politics were intertwined even more closely than they are today. Kings ruled by

¹ Anderson, Sam “The Hearts of New York: New York’s Collective Love Story,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 6, 2018.

² Interestingly, in Alabama it is illegal to wear a fake mustache that causes laughter in church, and you cannot dress as a priest for Halloween. Who comes up with these things? <https://yellowhammernews.com/tk-crazy-laws-alabama/>

divine right, and priests issued edicts to regulate everything from commerce to menstruation. In the Torah for example, people are forbidden from sitting where a menstruating woman has sat (Lev. 15:19-21); people cannot eat fat (Lev. 3:17); and rebellious sons are to be taken outside of the city gates to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)!

The legal code of ancient Israel is famously extensive. There are 613 commandments written in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), covering everything from criminal activity to food and personal conduct. The legal code is further extended by a huge body of rabbinic interpretation and oral tradition. Together, the rabbinic tradition along with the written commandments is known as the Halakha. Halakha is a word derived differently from what one might expect. It does not come from Mizvot (commandment or law). Instead, its roots are found in the verb that means to walk – it means, the *way to walk*. In ancient Israel, the law did more than just explicate what people could and couldn't do. It formed the community and was a guide for faithfully walking through life...but it was so extensive, the commentary so unwieldy, it was hard to fully follow it unless one was a priest or rabbi and could devote significant time to study and keeping the law.

So we have the Rich Young Ruler asking Jesus last week about the greatest commandment. And this week we have Paul, reminding the church in Rome that *love* fulfills the law. What does Paul mean by that?

Is he talking about the kind of love that blossoms on a bench in Central Park? The love that steals a kiss on the Staten Island Ferry? Love that dances till the wee hours of the morn? Maybe, but not only that. Paul's talking about agape love – love made possible because of God's love for humanity, made real in and through the person of Christ, shared amongst the community of believers. The love that fulfills the law is not a feeling... not butterflies in your stomach or floating on air. The feeling of being in love isn't something that can be commanded! The love Paul is talking about is an action –love that cares for and seeks the best for others. It's love shared in the public square – hands held not in romance but in solidarity, with a striking worker or a homeless woman or a depressed man. Love that fulfills the law says – I can't be who I am without valuing who God created you to be, yes, I will bake your wedding cake. Love that fulfills the law advocates for another, because your children are my children and they deserve to be protected no matter their legal status. Love that fulfills the law is not a feeling, it's an action.

All of the commandments are summed up, as Catherine preached last week, in the golden rule – love your neighbor as you love yourself.

When I lived in Guatemala, my family's land had a few adjacent neighbors. They weren't very friendly with the people that lived closest to them. The family was clearly more impoverished; they didn't have a lot of land. I can remember one day walking home after running errands with my host mother, Graciela, and my sister Yadira. Public buses would drop you on the highway, and there was a long walk up the mountain to get

home. The neighbor was walking towards us with a big bucket of corn, on her way to the Molina (the mill) to grind the corn into nixtamal, so that she could use it to make tortillas. I've told you before – the road up the hillside was rocky, and I don't know what happened but something did and she dropped the bucket.

Corn went everywhere.

Guatemalans are called people of maize because corn is the cornerstone of their diet. Their creation story has God creating man and woman out of an ear of corn. The corn that this woman dropped was surely going to feed her family, tortillas and tamalitos and tamales that accompanied every meal – and sometimes *were* the meal.

Graciela sat down her basket. Yadira put down her parcels. And without a word they stooped down in the dirt and began to help their neighbor pick up her corn. Every. last. kernel. Graciela had a fish in the pocket of her apron that she'd intended to fix for supper, and I remember thinking – she needs to get that fish into the refrigerator if I'm going to eat it! It took a long time. But they wouldn't leave her until all of the corn was back in the bucket. Because that is what they would have wanted someone else to do for them.

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. This is easy enough to figure out interpersonally, with your actual neighbors. We have an elderly neighbor and Will, a high school kid who lives two doors down, comes and takes her trash to the curb every Monday morning.

Love your neighbor as you love yourself. In our globalized world, it can be a lot harder to figure out how to live by this law when your neighbor is half a world away, but connected through our economic choices, our government's policy, or even just our shared humanity. I can be a little Scarlett O'Hara about it if I'm honest- I just won't think about that now, I'll think about that tomorrow.

But Paul writes with urgency to the church in Rome, urging them to live by the law of love as if Christ might return at any time. Wake up, he says. No more sleepwalking through life, ignoring those in need and telling yourself you'll be more compassionate tomorrow. Now is the time to wake from sleep. We've all had a sad wake up call this week, haven't we. Sandra Storm, so full of life, so passionate and vivacious – gone from us too soon, leaving behind a yard full of flowers and a house full of art and a community full of friends and a church full of love for her. This life is so precious. It is. And it is too hard to go it alone, which is why we are in it together. So friends, love one another. Show each other grace and support in this hard, sad time. Come to VBS on Wednesday and share some love with our neighbors. because when we love others, we fulfill the law.

Together this summer, we will ask – and seek to answer the question: “what does our love in the city look like?”

Post your photos and comments to our facebook page all summer long – so together, we create a portrait of love – agape love – God’s love – in Birmingham.