**Rhythms of Love** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Matthew 22:36-40; Exodus 20:1-20 Saint Paul, Minnesota
October 8, 2023

Almost like clockwork, something happens at the end of nearly every worship service here. The benediction goes forth—and then?

Almost nobody moves. Because the benediction isn’t the end of worship. It’s the postlude.

Whether it’s the reward at the end of another long harangue; whether it’s the cherry on this holy treat of Sunday; whether it’s the amplification or contemplation of all that we’ve held here together: the postlude keeps many of us glued to our seats, eager with anticipation at the beauty we’re about to behold.

What tempo will Aaron take? What improvisations might we hear? What volume games might he play to bend our ears and our hearts heavenward?

And what will happen to us if we listen to all that stirs within us, in these few sacred, brief, incredible moments?

It’s a time when time almost stops, slowing down enough for this space, for our bodies to resonate with the beauty washing over us.

And so we sit. We listen. And whatever thrilling or harrowing turn the organ takes, we are with Aaron through it all. We swell with the stops and shudder with the rafters. We are in the journey with him.

And then we celebrate! Clapping is hardly the word for it. There have even been Sundays when I’ve heard the uncharacteristic hoot and holler of unplanned enthusiasm. We just can’t hold it in; our feelings come to life in the rhythms of our hands, the cries of joy from our mouths, even tears that express the beauty we’ve just experienced.

Love is like that. It can’t be contained. It arrests us in its gaze and its timbre. It stirs us to the point of exclamation, and we can’t help expressing our gratitude in being in its magnificent presence.

But there is something rotten about the state of the so-called “love” we’re often sold.

We’re sold in our society that love is a feeling, a feeling deep inside.

We’re sold the idea that love is an idea.

We’re sold and told that what’s most important about love is saying it with words.

That it is romantic from the neck down and intellectual from the neck up.

In the Gospel text this morning, Jesus is put to the test. Of all the commandments informing and guiding the people of Israel, which is the greatest, he is asked? Jesus responds not by choosing, but by summarizing.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the two-fold commandment to love God completely and to love our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus summarizes the two tables of the Mosaic law, the decalogue, or as they’re more popularly known, the ten commandments.

Some of the commandments have to do with how we relate to God, while the others have to do with how we relate to each other. For Jesus, it all starts from and comes back to love.

As New Testament scholars remind us, the love which Jesus uses to summarize all the law and prophets: it has no power as a word or an idea. This love, *agape*, is not some abstract quality, an attitude, or a feeling, bubbling at the surface of our words or buried deep inside us. It’s not locked away in mysterious corners of our minds. It is divine action that informs all we do.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Love, at minimum, is distinctive, decisive action for the flourishing of God’s creation. And if we are to join in this holy dance, we must listen to, and practice, and respond to its rhythms—the footwork, the patterns, the steps to avoid, the paths to follow. Like playing scales on an instrument or singing solfege to open up our voices, the basic patterns and rhythms of love never stop working.

Since Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the law, Christians too are invited into this cosmic ten-step dance, these ancient yet prescient and powerfully subversive rhythms that can, with regular practice, resonate in our relationships with ourselves, with each other, throughout our families and our communities.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And just as the people begged Moses to speak to them, rather than with God directly, we are invited to interpret the Decalogue in our own moment of history.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What might these rhythms sound like today?

If we recognize God as liberator, and not oppressor, we are practicing love. This divine image is one of compassion and commitment, rather than control and domination. And if we affirm—as God does—that each of us bears the divine image, we see that we are bound together in mutual compassion and commitment. No part of our life is outside God’s liberating power. If we look in the mirror with contempt instead of compassion, it’s time to find others to help us see ourselves anew, through the lens of love. If our time isn’t devoted to projects that mirror God’s hope for a flourishing creation, it’s time to reorient our priorities. If our political climate doesn’t foster compassion and commitment to collective wellbeing, it’s time to increase our efforts—through time, with money, and in authentic relationship—to repair our world.

If we heed the commandment to worship God instead of the objects and ideas and economies of our own devising, we are practicing love. Through the rhythm of this commandment, we subordinate all our efforts to the flourishing of a creation we did not make and on which all of us depend. All our efforts bind us together in mutual compassion and commitment, for better and for worse, because we’re all children of God, even when we don’t always behave as such.

When we reserve the name of God for the holy mystery at the center of all life,[[5]](#footnote-5) and don’t confuse it with our religious, cultural, or social interpretations, we are practicing love. The rhythm of this commandment allows us to hold lightly even the most sacred ideas and projects that have been meaningful to us, ready to offer them back to God when they cease pointing in the divine direction.

When we set aside time for rest and rejuvenation, we are practicing love. The rhythm of this commandment is the resonance of being in tune with all creation through inaction, stillness. It is the collaborative, collective breath in, and breath out. It is resting in the reminder, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel attests, “that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of humanity.” There is freedom to smile without purpose, to linger without schedule, to say no for a time to the incessant “wringing [of] profit from the earth,”[[6]](#footnote-6) to join in God’s divine laziness that gives love time to grow.

When we honor our parents, we are practicing love. From the rhythm of this commandment can come the breaking of unhelpful habits and the passing on of healing ones. A tenderness toward those who brought us forth and raised us up in this world—for better and for worse—can be cultivated by parenting and grandparenting, but more collectively by seeing our divine kinship with each other as a mutual, universal responsibility for caregiving.

When we honor honesty and non-violence in personal and civic relationships, we are practicing love. The rhythm of these commandments brings forth patience, kindness, gentleness, humility, self-control, and other virtues familiar to our ears and hearts.[[7]](#footnote-7) Mutual flourishing is made tangible in the words we use and the actions we refrain from in our relationships with one another, and not just those with whom we share neighborhoods, or social status, or worldviews. Our enemies—those we seem to loathe to our core—also bear the visible imprint of the invisible God, and merit honor and respect.

When we restrain the temptation for more when we have more than enough, we are practicing love. The rhythm of this commandment resonates in dischord with war, famine, poverty, and other predatory economic relations. Instead we are invited to messy, difficult, painstaking peace, uneasy sharing, an ethic of reverence for the needs of our neighbors, and an inner liberty from all that seeks to control or dominate us.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But these commandments, these ancient, holy rhythms are nothing without listening, without practice, without response in relationship. All the words we conjure to make sense of what God calls us to do are just that: words. They point to actions to be lived.

So when you sit still after today’s service—when you listen deeply to all that stirs within you as the postlude winds its way through your hearts—pay attention to the joyous release and response of your hands. Listen to the thrills of your voice.

For this can be the posture of our lives: to respond back to this messy, strange gift of life in rhythms of love. It can be your practice when you meet eyes with the people posted like sacred sentinels at the on- and off-ramps of I-94: God’s image calling forth for you to behold and connect with.

Almost like clockwork, when we connect with one another, we can enact these sacred rhythms, and slow down enough to feel the resonance of love connecting us together.

Join in the rhythms of by spending time with children not your own. Behold beauty that calls forth the deepest stirrings in your heart in the laughter, the tears, the quiet, holy moments you share with them. What turn will their stories take? What glimpse of heaven might you miss if you miss the rhythm of the moment?

Open yourself to relationships with your wider community: not only because they need you, but because you need them: for mutual flourishing, to remember that you too bear the divine image of the Love at the center of all. And that you are worthy of receiving the unmerited, gratuitous grace and love of Jesus Christ as the free gift from strangers.

What will happen to us if we listen, and then respond in love, keeping time with these ancient rhythms, to all that stirs within us, in these few sacred, brief, incredible moments of life?

Might our responses to the beauty we’ve beheld be part of the work of building a place, a kingdom, a family worthy of God’s infinite love?

For that eternal invitation—to dance together with all creation to the rhythms of love—I say thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Matthew 22:36-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 538 (specifically the notes listed for 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; the same word for love, *agape*, is used in Matthew’s gospel, cf. 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 20:18-19, also see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume I*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press: 2006), 360-362 (Book II, Chapter 7, Sections 12-13) as argument for the ongoing reinterpretation of the Mosaic law for the Christian life. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Oluwatomisin Oredein, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye and her Circle,” in *The Christian Century, May 2023*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005), 89: “Nothing is as hard to suppress as the will to be a slave to one’s own pettiness. Gallantly, ceaselessly, quietly, man must fight for inner liberty. Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things. This is our constant problem—how to live with people and remain free, how to live with things and remain independent.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)