

In today's reading from Romans, Paul starts off the passage with the classic scorekeeping phrase "*owe no one anything.*" Owe no one anything. It is a reference to the early church's relationship with the government. He says "*Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*"

Owe no one anything is a very tidy, accountable way to live. It can be a very satisfying way to live as well. I love the times when I feel like I've checked my boxes and in my mind, at least, I owe no one anything. I've made my hospital visits, done my pastoral counseling, checked in with the staff, put in enough hours on the sermon for the day, and picked up Brussels Sprouts on the way home like I was told to, and helped out with homework, and cleaned the dishes, and written the thank you notes, returned all emails, voicemails, snail mails, text messages, facebook messages, tweets and twitters. Oh yeah, and paid the government my quarterly taxes.

Fulfilling all your obligations, owing no one anything, can be a satisfying way to live – in theory. But when does it really ever happen? Most of the time I am just anxious, frustrated or exhausted by the list of things left undone. There is so much that I still owe.

From time to time, who can't relate to the Onion's Overtired 398 – Month-Old Who Throws A Tantrum? *Appearing tired, agitated, and "a lot fussier than usual," whining 398-month-old Jeff Burnsworth reportedly threw a big tantrum Saturday evening. "The poor guy must be tuckered out," said roommate Andy Northcutt, explaining that the normally well-behaved Burnsworth had skipped his afternoon nap.... " He's already had his dinner, so I know it's not that. I think he's probably just ready to be put down for the night."*

Owe no one anything. Let's go deeper than taxes and Brussels Sprouts. Most of our relationships operate on an I owe you – you owe me basis. Rare is the relationship that isn't contractual. If you hurt my feelings, then you...owe...me an apology. He's your father, young man, so you owe him some respect. She reached out last time, so I owe her a phone call.

Rare is the marriage that doesn't on some level keep a ledger of wrong things said or right things done. I got up with the baby last night. We went to your parents for Thanksgiving last year. Don't you think you owe me a Girls weekend? But I worked in the yard all morning before my tee time! These examples don't even approach the territory of infidelity or bedroom frigidness or family money from your mother's side.

We might imagine Barney the Dinosaur as a relational accountant, singing, *"I owe you, you owe me. We're a scorekeeping family. With a great big debt for the things I've done for you, won't you say you owe me too?"*

Well. Who really wants to live this way? Only the parsimonious and the nitpickers. And that's not really living is it? Scrooge is so concerned with each pence and pound that he has no room for people, or joy, or Christmas. There has got to be another way.

And of course, there is another way, or as St. Paul says elsewhere, *a more excellent way*. *"And now let me show you a more excellent way"*, Paul says in 1 Corinthians. And the way, obviously, is love. *Owe no one anything....except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

There is one thing and one thing only that fulfills the law, that settles all accounts, that perfectly completes every duty – love. Paul says that all the commandments – don't commit adultery, to murder, don't steal, don't envy – are all summed up in one uniform action: loving your neighbor. Jesus says the exact same thing in the "summary of the law": love God and love your neighbor.

Love one another, Paul says. That's the more excellent way. His description in 1 Corinthians 13 of what this actually entails has never been bettered. *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way."* And next is the description that closes the door on the IOU/You Owe Me, scorekeeping way of life. *Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

What would your life be like if you kept no record of wrongs? Can you imagine the freedom, the lightness of such a life? Can you imagine if grievance and grudge had no place to hang their filthy hats in your heart?

Can you imagine just not remembering wrongs done to you, debts owed to you, accounts paid or not paid to you? In such a life there might actually be space cleared out for fun, for celebration....for love.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. You can forget about trying to categorize all your niggling obligations and just go out and love. So...go do it. Just do it. Easy enough, right?

Just go be patient when you're overtired and want to throw a tantrum. Just go be kind when someone takes advantage of you...again. Just don't envy when he's got more but does less. Just don't insist on your own way, when your own way is so obviously right and her way is moronically wrong. St. Paul and the Beatles are clearly right – all we need is love. So, owe no one anything, but make sure that you love everyone.

You can see that the demand of the law – owe no one anything – isn't eased by Paul's next injunction – love everyone. In fact, the demand has gone from the sort of, maybe, on my best day sometimes doable if I've had my nap and my supper, to clearly impossible for anyone with a normal, that is sinful, human heart. The back of last week's NYT Book Review has an ad for the Great Courses class you can enjoy via DVD. As I've had the Book Review facedown on my desk all week, untouched (oops, I really need to get to that... the Sunday NY Times isn't cheap) the headline has been staring at me everyday: *When Abnormal Behavior Happens, Whose Fault Is It?* Well, I don't need to pay \$254.95 to The Great Courses to know that the answer is...Me.

Still, Paul urges us to love. And all more as he senses the urgency of the times. He says, "*Now the moment for you to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness (debauchery, quarreling, jealousy) and put on the armor of light.*" What Paul says here is basically summarized by Bob Dylan in "All Along The Watchtower" - "*So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.*"

How is this patient, kind, keep no record of wrongs love possible? Paul says it at the end of the passage: *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. Be dressed in love, in other words. Because there has only been one person in the history of the world who perfectly and sinlessly fulfills the law of love as described by Paul. There has been only one who was perfectly patient, perfectly kind, who did not insist on his own way, who endured all things,

and most poignantly, did not keep a record of wrongs. God says of Himself, *“I will remember your sins no more.”* (Isaiah 43:25).

To put on the Lord Jesus Christ is to put on love; it is to be hidden in Him, safe and secure from all alarms. Here’s a visual for you. Last Sunday between the morning services I was out in the street with my black cassock and flowing white surplice. My friend, Ila Byrd, who is almost 3, was out there with her parents and some other adults. Ila sees me all the time, but has never seen me in my church get-up. She exclaimed, *“Papa Walker! Why do you look like that?!?”* We all laughed about the billowing robes on Jefferson Street. But that didn’t satisfy Ila – enquiring minds want to know. She said, *“No, really, Papa Walker! Why are you wearing that dress?”*

There is actually a good answer to Ila’s question. The black cassock represents the darkness of the human heart, the heart that keeps on keeping on in its darkness even after we have been saved by grace through faith. And the long, white surplice represents the righteousness of Christ, who covers and hides us and remembers your sins no more.

You are all wearing that same dress. I love your outfit. And like mine, it is all paid for. And if I love your outfit, then there is a chance that I might love you and you might love me and we might be a happy family. Amen.