

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

September 6, 2026 – PENTECOST 15 / PROPER 18A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Loving Everyone—Because God Loved Us First*”

Ezekiel 33:7-11	(God does not want the wicked to perish, but to be saved)
Psalms 119:33-40	(A prayer for the Lord to teach us His commandments)
Romans 13:8-14	(Loving one another fulfills all the commandments)
St. Matthew 18:15-20	(The Scriptural procedure for dealing with one who does wrong)

How's your credit rating these days? Are you keeping up with what you owe, or have you fallen behind? Now before you get nervous, let me clarify what I'm asking. I'm not asking about your personal finances, mortgage, car payment, or credit card balance. I'm asking about how you're *loving*, these days. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another,” St. Paul says in today's Epistle reading from his Letter to the Romans. That line caught my attention when I first read it, and it's continued to challenge me. Paul is describing love as a *debt* we owe one another.

I don't often think of love as a debt I owe others. Do you? Love as a debt we owe everyone probably isn't what most of us have been told or come to believe. Think about how we often speak about and/or misunderstand love. We say we love all sorts of stuff. “I love that song.” “I love chocolate.” “I love springtime.” And, “I love my husband, wife, kids, grandkids, etcetera.”

We've all probably said things like that. But what does any of that even mean? Is a song, or chocolate, or a season really on the same level as your family? What do we mean by love? We are taught by the culture to associate love with romance and feelings of attraction. That's why (supposedly) we can fall in or out of love. The Righteous Brothers told us love is a kiss with closed eyes and tenderness in the fingertips and if those are gone, “you've lost that loving feeling.” A catchy song, but is love truly as fickle as our feelings? Can love remain even after the feelings are gone?

The Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote for her husband Robert, “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” If I thought about how I love Rick, I could probably list a hundred reasons. But would I cease loving him if he stopped playing the piano, or he lost his hair? The singer Lana Del Rey asked a similar question, “Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?” And of course, the Beatles wanted to know: “Will you still love me when I'm sixty-four?”

Think about other things we hear about love in songs and movies. “You complete me.” “You're my everything.” “I can't live without you.” This sounds so good until you realize the lyrics are all about neediness. So, is love an expression of codependence? Basically, “I'm not okay unless you're okay”? Have you ever said to someone, or had someone say to you, “If you loved me you would (*fill in the blank*)”? Is that the love St. Paul is writing about? Is ‘love’ actually that manipulative? Does love mean getting what we want out of the other person?

What if love has no reasons? What if love has no conditions? What if loving is the most natural, and sometimes difficult, thing we do? What if we took responsibility for our own lives, didn't hold anyone else responsible for us, and merely loved *because we love*, and not because we are needing or getting something out of it? Surely there is more to true love than that.

Too many of us acquired our definition of love from novels or movies. Anyone here who *doesn't* remember, “Love means never having to say you're sorry,” from the sappy 1970 film, “Love Story”? Would that life and love were so simple! But they're not. That's why we need to turn to the Bible for the authentic definition of true love—both as we see it in the self-sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ, and as we read about it in First Corinthians 13:5-8 (NRSV): “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”¹

Moreover, Paul writes in today's lesson from Romans, "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law"—in other words, has fulfilled God's Ten Commandments. That may sound simple, too, but it's not easy. Because, just as in First Corinthians, Paul isn't talking about sentimental affection. He's talking about the kind of love that changes how we treat actual human beings—especially those who are difficult or different from us.

It's easy to love people who love us back. It is considerably harder to love someone who drives us crazy or believes things that make us furious; harder still, to love someone who has hurt us. And perhaps most difficult of all is to love a person whose opinions, politics, personality, or way of seeing the world are completely foreign to our own. Yet Paul says, this is where the Christian life becomes visible. Biblical love is less about how we *feel* and more about how we *live*. Love means not wishing anyone evil, but rather, hoping—or even praying—for their good. It means patience when patience is difficult. It means forgiveness when we would rather hold onto our resentment. It means speaking truth without cruelty. It means setting appropriate boundaries without hatred. It means noticing the person whom everyone else overlooks. And sometimes, it means doing something quite small.

Recently, a woman was standing in line at a grocery store. Ahead of her was an elderly man who was counting out coins to pay for his items. The line behind him grew longer. People became visibly impatient and started muttering complaints. The woman noticed what was happening and simply said gently to the man, "Take your time." Nothing dramatic happened. She didn't preach a sermon. She didn't perform a great act of charity. She simply offered another human being *dignity*. That, too, is love. And sometimes the most Christian thing we can do is simply make room for another person to be human—whether it's your coworker, next-door neighbor, or a homeless person.

Each Sunday, we gather in the midst of an imperfect world and practice living as people of the coming Kingdom. We confess our sins; we hear God's Word; we exchange the peace; we come to the Table; we receive Christ. Then, we are sent back into the world. The Eucharist is not an escape from the world. It is preparation for returning to the world as Christ's people. We come forward with empty hands, and God fills them with Himself. Then we go back out with something to give. We have received mercy, so we become people who offer mercy. We have received forgiveness, so we become people who practice forgiveness. We have been welcomed to Christ's Table, so we become people who make room for others.

In First John 4:19 (CEB), we read: "We love because God loved us first." We have been loved by God since the foundation of the world, and through what Jesus Christ has done for us. Because of God's great love for us, we *can be* people who love. In fact, Jesus said in John 13:35 (EHV), "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That is why St. Paul's command to "owe no one anything, except to love one another" is so much more than a moral instruction. It is a sign of our discipleship, and a description of what happens when Christ is in us.²

And here's the strange thing about this debt of love. It is not a debt we can ever pay off. In the verse immediately before today's reading Paul says, "Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Those are debts that get paid off. You receive a release of lien, a cancellation of note, or a certificate of discharge. Debt fulfillment in life is a *transaction*. Not so, with love.

So, once again, how's *your* credit rating? Owing one another love is a unique debt because we can never finish paying it in full. There will always be another person to love. Another wound to forgive. Another kindness to offer. Another despondent person to cheer up. Another opportunity to speak with grace rather than anger. Another chance to choose patience. And perhaps that's exactly the Bible's point. Love is not something we ever complete. It is something we practice again and again. Sunday after Sunday. Day after day. Until, at last, our lives begin to look more like the One whom we have chosen to follow, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God in Person—and the Bible tells us God IS Love. "Is"—an eternal present-tense.

God has shown us that love is not a transaction, but rather, an ongoing relationship, a way of being with, and toward, both God and one another. We should not say, "I loved," but "*I am loving*," because love continues forever. Some days we do it well; other days we struggle. Either way, the debt remains.

So, we love beyond feelings, without reasons, even if it's not reciprocated, no matter how much effort it takes, or how deeply it breaks our hearts. We love because that's who we are, but most important, because that's who *God is*, and because God loved us first.

Let us pray:

Merciful Father, powerful Holy Spirit, compassionate Jesus—one God—we praise You for the love with which You love us, in which You have rooted and grounded us, and through which You are transforming us. It took the Trinity to redeem us, and it takes the Trinity for us to live this life of love to which You have called us. Without Your help, we could not even think of living as “imitators of God.” Hear our plea. Lord, we don't need an intellectual belief that we are Your dearly-loved children. So let us *experience* Your love in a deep and transforming way, that it may be to us exceedingly real, deeply humbling, and ultimately liberating.³

Forgive us for the idols of our hearts, for treasuring comfort and pleasure, affirmation and self-esteem, success and work, family and fortune. We pray that the roots of Your love would burrow deep into our hearts and bring forth new life. Help us to love everyone with true biblical love. Give us grace to show forth the love You have given us in Christ, through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

And dear God, we thank You that even though our love for You falters at times, and even though we may flounder in our love for others, Your love for us in Christ will never fail. It will endure forever, because nothing in life or death, or on earth or in heaven, can separate us from Your love. Reshape our hearts this day, to love You and others more than ever. In the Precious Name of Jesus we pray. *Amen.*⁴

¹ Adapt. Michael K. Marsh, “Paying What We Owe,” 11 September 2023, [Interrupting the Silence](https://interruptingthesilence.com/2023/09/11/paying-what-we-owe-a-sermon-on-romans-138-14/) <<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2023/09/11/paying-what-we-owe-a-sermon-on-romans-138-14/>> 1 September 2026.

² Adapt. C. H. Atgeepitey, “The Endless Debt of Love,” 31 August 2026. Private communication.

³ Adapt. Scotty Smith, “A Prayer for Loving as the Dearly Beloved,” 6 June, 2013, [TGC, US Edition](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scotty-smith/a-prayer-for-loving-as-the-dearly-beloved/) <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/scotty-smith/a-prayer-for-loving-as-the-dearly-beloved/>> 1 September 2026.

⁴ Adapt. Christina Fox, “A Prayer for Greater Love,” 11 February 2020, <<https://www.christinafox.com/blog/2020/1/29/a-prayer-for-greater-love/>> 1 September 2026.