

-Alonso Gullien, a 31 year old from Lukfin, Texas, drove over 100 miles in order to get to Houston last week. Being a radio DJ for a community radio station and constantly using his show as a “get out the word” and “fundraiser” for various causes, Alonso’s quick trip to Houston was no surprise for his parents. With two friends and a borrowed boat, he explained that he needed to “go save lives, go help people, do something.” So, Alonso and his friends became part of what has been called the “Cajun Navy”, a massive gathering of private individuals and their personal watercraft with the sole mission of getting people out of Houston alive. Volunteering one’s boat and time to be in this effort was not your usual “fishing trip down the river”, however. In fact, it was very dangerous: downed power lines, damaged buildings, and very powerful water currents continue to be obstacles to the rescue efforts. Tragically, Alonso and his two friends, while searching a neighborhood for survivors, got swept into a very powerful current that propelled them straight into a bridge which capsized the boat they were in. Alonso and his one other friend died in the accident.

-“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” says that Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. I have been thinking a lot about this past week on what “loving one’s neighbor” really means.

-Love is a hard concept to understand fully and I continue to try to grasp its impact in my own life. I remember talking with then recently retired Lutheran Pastor Len from Kalispell, who was a mentor to me while I worked at the T-shirt shop in Glacier National Park for a summer in college. He talked about how he only did weddings now that he was retired and that he relied on his usual “wedding sermon” each time. Though he would try to tailor it in some specific ways to the couple he was marrying, this “in the pocket” sermon, he explained, centered around the Greek “Four types of Love” (agápe, éros, philía, and storgē). Though I find the Greek language fascinating, I now wonder if separating love into “categories” (though the Greeks had several reasons for doing this which I won’t get into) is really helpful for us in our time and place.

-Kinda like Pastor Len’s sermon outlines, love seems to me more and more one of those things that we like to separate ourselves from and put into nice and neat little academic packages (this type of love is the “kissy romantic love”, this type of love is the friendship, brotherly love, this type of love is ....etc. etc.)

-Maybe we (as products of the Enlightenment, a movement which prided itself on separating the human self from emotions in order to accomplish higher ideals) do this type of separation subconsciously. Love is an academic exercise, something that you talk about at the therapist office maybe, but something that needs to be understood versus practiced. Send your card on Valentine’s Day or tell your spouse “I love you”, but don’t get too deep into the “lovey dovey” stuff.

-Because of this separation we like to have with love, it becomes harder to comprehend Alonso's action to save his neighbors. Why and how could he be moved to do such a thing?

-Maybe because Alonso demonstrated love as something other than a concept one just "understands."

-There is a concept in Sufism, a mystic tradition that originally formed out of Islam, called *Ekatma*. *Ekatma*, or "oneness", is seen as the true meaning and goal of love. The best way to describe it maybe is: "the loss of walls, or barriers". The instant two become one. *Ekatma* is used commonly when referring to one's path toward the divine. In Sufism, one of your end goals is for "total embrace of the divine", or where you and God become one. But *Ekatma* is more than just "a faith journey's end goal", it is everywhere in life. A friend (who is a practicing sufi) was explaining this to me just a few days ago: *Ekatma* is the glue that holds different particles of atoms together, it is what holds the cell walls and other parts of living cells together. It is the bond between a mother and her young. *Ekatma*, she explained, is the "building block of the universe": it is understood as the holding of different pieces in life together as one.

-That's crazy to me if you think about that for a second: that means the very essence of life, the very thing that keeps us alive and together, the very thing that keeps this planet going is: love.

-I think this is how Paul sees love too. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." What is he talking about? You see the Apostle Paul is living in a society where "owing somebody something" is expected. You owe taxes to the empire, owe your allegiance to Ceasar, owe your life to your family's honor, and so on. So, Paul's call to "not owe someone anything" is pretty radical and seems to call on something more basic. Loving one another isn't just some duty or academic exercise that we need to implement, it's what makes us ...us. Living your life, being fully human, is living out love and oneness.

-It's no wonder, then, why Paul (and Jesus says this too which is where Paul got it from): Of all the commandments and teachings of our faith, it all boils down to one thing: love your neighbor as yourself. Be *one* with your neighbor. Let nothing be a barrier between you and your neighbor.

- Alonso understood this and has become, I believe, a model of the fullness of love Christ and Paul are talking about. Alonso also represents love in a different way. You may have heard his name in the news because Alonso was also enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. A program that has been needlessly canceled and which threatens over 800,000 individuals, mostly young adults who know no other country as their home but this one.

-I believe we as a collective nation, need to understand love as a calling to oneness. We as a people whose ancestors came here as immigrants need to look at ourselves and ask: "what is love?" Is love a calling, an anchor, a guide that we keep coming back to

again and again in order to be more human? Or is it a nice image on a Hallmark card that we give to Grandma? "All the commandments are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself"

-We live in some scary and unpredictable times right now. Wildfires, Hurricanes (Irma is hitting Florida right now as a matter of fact), political polarization, nuclear weapons. We need our neighbor right now and they need us. We will not be able to solve these challenges without our neighbor. May God walk with us as we strive to more deeply live out our humanity and break down walls in the name of love. Amen.