Our journey through the Book of Romans is nearing completion. We have experienced Paul’s most complete expression of the Christian faith and in this final summation, we see the apostle appealing to the core element of what it means to follow Christ: love. When I was reflecting on this passage ahead of composing these thoughts, the Beatles’ tune “All we need is love” ran through my mind. When we give consideration to the world we live in today, the challenges we face, the struggles we endure, all of these can be met with the astringent love of Christ and the healing we so desperately long for and pray for can be found.

Paul, in these sections of ch. 12 and 13, outlines that the goal of being transformed in the renewing of our minds is so that we can be able to test and approve what God’s will is for us. In other words, our life in faith, once we have met Jesus, is not complete. In fact, Jesus doesn’t care to leave us where we are, but Jesus challenges us, moves us, bids us, and love us into a deeper relationship with him. By spending time in that relationship, we can better know God’s will in our lives and we will experience transformation.

The social media phenomenon that is now a permanent addition to our society is changing our culture in ways we are only beginning to understand. We have Facebook “friends” but what is the degree of our “friendship?” We have Snapchat, where we can send pictures to our “friends” of what we are currently doing, but where is the relationship? Perhaps the dynamics of friendship and authentic relationship are there, but there is clearly a shift from what I experienced in spending countless hours with a few special individuals that I could call “friends.”

I share that insight, as we think about our relationship with Christ. Is it a Facebook type relationship, where we would check Jesus’ status if he had a Facebook page and “like” it when he said something really profound, such as “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” We might even add a comment, like, “That’s pretty cool!” Or is our relationship with Jesus one of perhaps an era gone by, where we are spending significant time with Jesus, pouring ourselves into knowing him, even as he is pouring himself out for us?

I am blessed with about 5 very close friends. I know, that’s more than my fair share. But to a person, I could call them with a need and each one would drop everything and would make their way to me and it’s because they know I would do it for them. Distance has separated us somewhat, so that we don’t see each other as often. But when we do, it’s as if there has not been any time that has lapsed. But the deeper reality is we want to spend time together, we enjoy one
another’s company, and when we are together, we make each other better people. Time with Jesus has the same impact on us and we can move beyond the superficial to the significant.

Love does have boundaries and expectations. To have love is to create permission to engage at the deepest levels of human being, to be vulnerable, to be open, and to care for someone as if you were caring for yourself. As Paul wrote in ch. 13, love does not harm.

In the 24 hour news / information cycle we live in today, I am struck at how worked up people can become over something in which they have little or no control. The notion of “agency” and what we can affect is something we need to give careful consideration to as we look at the allocation of our most precious resource, time. I find time and again people getting all worked up about things going on in the world.” This can easily move us to a place of cynicism and despair. The rancor is only increased during a political election cycle. We really haven’t seen too many displays of love in our civil discourse!

But what I am mindful of is that we do have agency in how we act, how we choose to respond, how we choose to interact with those around us. Many of you have Facebook friends, but have you taken the time to get to know your neighbor? Jesus said something somewhere about neighbors…I believe it was something about loving them like we love ourselves.

I love Romans 13:11, “And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” If there ever was a time to wake up, for the hour has come, it is now! The Beatles’ jingle, “All we need is love” is not just a great song, but it is an admonition, a cure for the ills that we face.

Do not get so consumed about the things going on out “in the world” far away from your locale that you neglect to affect the things you do have agency over in your churches and communities. Clothe the naked, visit the sick, feed the hungry, get to know your neighbors, and change your little corner of the world.

One of the great hymns sung often around Christmas is “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” The song concludes with the line, “And let it begin with me!” Just for this moment, let’s change the words: “Let there be LOVE on earth…and let it begin with me!”