

# “Love Your Neighbor As Yourself”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 10, 2017

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20 and Romans 13:8-14

*‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’*

***Matthew 18:15-20***

*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 neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

***Romans 13:8-14***

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work in our hearts and in our minds. Let it be a word of comfort where we are hurting, a word of challenge where we are proud, and a word that invites us into being faithful Christians in the week ahead. We ask this, I ask this, in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Pepperoni Pizza! I learned this several years ago, while taking a training with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance on self-care and compassion fatigue. There were several of us gathered in Jacksonville, Florida, in a hotel conference room, and the Reverend-- or, excuse me, Dr. Eric Gentry, a leading traumatologist, was teaching on how the brain functions, and how things work inside of us, and trying to get us to understand that if we told ourselves, or told others, "Well, just don't work as hard," that what the brain hears is, "Work as hard." It doesn't register that negative in front of anything. If you said, "Don't eat french fries," the brain is hearing, "Eat french fries," and you start thinking about french fries, and imagining french fries. So he said, "You've got to be very careful when you're talking to people, especially in the area of compassion fatigue and self-care, but really in all of life, that if you want them to do something, you need to do it in the affirmative. You don't do it ever as a negative." And what Paul is doing here is picking up on what Christ is doing in the Gospels, when he says that the two great commandments are to love the Lord your God, and then to love your neighbor. Paul is saying here that all of those "not" commandments in the tablets that you as members of the faith community in Rome have heard, "You've got to follow these, they're the most important ones." Really, they can all be summed up by the phrase, "Love your neighbor." Because our brain does not register, "You shall not commit adultery." It hears, "You shall commit adultery." Even though we're saying the word, "Not," our brain can't handle that. And so he's giving them a great tool to understand what it means to be a Christian. To love your neighbor as yourself.

If somebody ever were to ask you, "What is the essence of your Christian faith?" You could say, "Well, it's to love my neighbor," and that would be enough. That would satisfy the answer. They may want more. You can say, "Well, to love God and to love my neighbor." That would be a fuller exposition, but loving your neighbor is really the essence and the heart of who we are as the followers of Jesus Christ. There's been a lot of opportunity in the weeks that have passed, and in this week, and in the weeks and months and possibly even years ahead, for all of us to love our neighbors. As we've watched water rise and rain fall and winds blow, first in Houston, Texas with Hurricane Harvey, and now all over Florida with Hurricane Irma, and in the Virgin Islands and Carribean. So much devastation has already occurred, and we know that so much more is likely.

Several members of this congregation have houses down in Venice, Florida, and we all know that Paul Reiter, our beloved parish associate moved not too long ago to Venice as well. I've been in contact with Paul and Ande and, earlier this week, they moved from Venice, Florida up to Tampa to be with their son Jon. And then hearing the news and doing the kind of projections, they realized Tampa was probably not the best place to be and so they've moved up to Georgia, following sort of the path of safety but not knowing that the hurricane's kind of following behind them. They, like millions of others, have decided to get out the way, and then there are others who've decided to hunker down, all of whom we pray this day will be safe in the days ahead.

And, again, we're going to see lots of opportunities, not just for us, but for everyone to love their neighbors as themselves, as they offer a hand in cleaning up and rebuilding and restoring life as it once was. My sister-in-law is a flight attendant for World Airways and she lives in an apartment with other flight attendants in Houston, Texas. A couple weeks ago, she was on a trip transferring-- her airline mostly does charters for professional sports teams and the military is the prime client. And several weeks ago, she was in Abu Dhabi, having just moved some troops, and was on her way back through Germany, coming home, when Hurricane Harvey struck. The flight that she was on got stopped in Bangor, Maine for a couple days, as the company was trying to determine where they could land and what was going to happen. And, eventually, they were allowed to fly to Texas but not into Houston. Instead, they were sent to a military base nearby and bussed back to the airport in Houston, where she was able to retrieve her very old Honda CRV, lovingly nicknamed Big Mama.

This thing is red, and way off the ground, and has rust in all the right places. She's loved that car for a long time.

Knowing that Big Mama was safe, she and her roommate, Darlene, got in the car and drove to their apartment to find that it, too, was okay. But many of the streets that they passed, they could see that there was water on them and that people had all their stuff outside, carpets, and chairs, and laundry equipment, and everything. Even drywall was starting to come off right away. They decided since they were okay that they were going to take Big Mama to Walmart and fill it up with diapers, and mops, and buckets, and cleaning supplies, and water, and just drive around and hand the stuff out. I don't think that they gave much thought to whether they should do it from any sense of being Christian or being a good person. They just knew they had to do something because their neighbors were in need and they were okay. So they went and filled up the car, and started driving down the streets. They gave away the diapers, and the water, the pails, the mops, the cleaning supplies, but Jennifer said that, at one place where she stopped, the woman that she got out and gave a bucket and a mop to, looked almost through her and then said, "You have no idea what you're bringing to me." Jennifer was kind of stunned and taken aback because the tone of the, "You have no idea what you're bringing to me," she wasn't sure if the woman was being profound or angry. And she said then, what the woman told us was, "You have no idea what you're bringing to me. You're bringing me hope." and then the woman walked over, wrapped her arms around Jennifer's neck, and just began to bawl. They stood there together for several minutes crying together.

Love your neighbor as yourself. My sister-in-law went to the store, bought some supplies, took them to a stranger, and I believe in that moment, experienced God's grace in a very profound way because she was willing to share what she had with someone she didn't know. And that woman was blessed. And more importantly, or as importantly, Jennifer got blessed as well. Because when that woman shared those profound words, I believe that something was awakened within my sister-in-law. She realized what grace feels like all of a sudden because she was willing to do what was needed. A simple thing. Go to the store, buy some supplies, and hand them out. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In anticipation of preaching I came across a story from my home state of Washington. There was a retired postal worker named Phyllis who, during her time of working, was driving around in Grays Harbor County, Washington, which is the very northwest corner, up where the Pacific Ocean meets the land. It's a sparsely populated area. There's a lot of poverty there. She was the postal worker, so she knew the kind of things people were receiving, she knew how many kids they had, kind of what was going on in their lives. And at one point not too long ago she learned that the funding for the summer food program to provide lunches to the kids who were underneath the poverty level and used to get lunches from the school, that program was cut. And those people were no longer getting lunches during the summer. And so Phyllis decided that she was going to do something about it. And she got her friends together and they were thinking, "We're going to make lunches for these people." Now one of the best parts of this story is that her ministry or outreach is called Green Lantern Lunch Program. And when I first read that I thought, "Oh, she's picking on some character from the comic book so that the kids will know who Green Lantern is, right?" But no. In fact, Phyllis gathers with her friends at the Green Lantern Tavern in Copalis Beach, Washington before it opens to its regular clientele each morning and they hand make all the lunches and put them into sacks. And then there's a couple of them that fill their cars and go out and hand out all these lunches. This past summer, they delivered 25,064 lunches. A volunteer, retired, who said, "We're all put on this earth to do something. Better to give than to take." 25,064 lunches. Love your neighbor as yourself.

So I don't do this very often from the pulpit, but I'm going to give each one of you a challenge for this week. I'm going to invite you to love your neighbor as yourself. I want to invite you to think about a neighbor that you don't know really well. Not the one that you invite over every weekend but maybe one that you kind of know their name or say hi in passing but you don't really spend a lot of time with them. I'm going to invite you to identify that neighbor and to do something that tells them, "Thank you for being a good neighbor."

And I give you sort of what I've come up with as I thought about this. I have a neighbor who lives next to me who's a firefighter in Rock Hill. His wife works at a bank downtown. I know them by name, but we're kind of over the fence neighbors. The longest talk I'd ever had with them is about high school kids that park on our street and walk to school. And we always wonder why they linger so much and what are they doing and is it legal or not and should we call the cops. I mean, that kind of neighbor. And I realize what I'm going to do is go buy them a bottle of wine because I think they would enjoy that, but I know I love a bottle of wine. So I'm going to go get a bottle of wine and I'm going to put a little note on it that says thank you. And I'm going to walk over there and I'm going to knock on the door and I'm going to hand it to them and I'm going to say to them, "This is for you. Thank you for you for being a good neighbor." And then I'm just going to be quiet and see what happens. I'm not going to tell them that the preacher at church told me to do it or the Bible told me to do it or any of that. I'm just going to tell them, in a tangible way, thank you for being a good neighbor. Or maybe you have a neighbor who needs something done. Maybe you could help them do that or help them find a way to do it. Whatever it is, I'm wondering if we as a church, for the week ahead, could actually just do something and help a neighbor. Or tell them that we are grateful for them. Do you think you could do that?

Love your neighbor as yourself. Embody the love of Christ without strings or conditions and just do one thing. I look forward to hearing how it goes. Amen.