

Love Your Neighbor: 1. Be the Bridge
Matthew 22: 35-37; 1 John 4:7-8
January 3, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

I learned a new word in 2020. Actually it wasn't a new word but a new application of a word that I learned a long time ago when I was playing basketball. And the word is PIVOT. If you've never played basketball, when you are holding the basketball, you have a pivot foot and a swing foot and you can move or pivot in any direction as long as your pivot foot never leaves the floor. And in 2020, we did a lot of pivots. Many of us began working from home and going to school from home. Since March almost every gathering that included more than 10 people shut down. But the work of the church did not shut down. We continued to worship every week, but utilizing technology that enabled us to do so from home. We have small groups that now gather online and even include people from other parts of the country. We made phone calls to our members multiple times, sent cards of encouragement, provided children and families with monthly packets, offered encouragement to person who are homebound, launched weekly prayer and devotional on Facebook. We held memorial services in the Celebration Garden and when the number attending such services was small, we provided DVD recordings and even streaming so others could participate. You gathered for worship in the parking lot and connected with our staff through several drive-through activities. You provided support to the teachers and staff of Oakwood School and provided thousands of snacks to students. You showed up time after time providing food to families at Bloom, food distributions in Minneapolis, and continued your support of local food shelves. You assisted families in financial need in our church families and through our partner congregation Iglesia Piedra Viva.

As Christmas Eve approached, I wondered what would happen when we could not gather in person. And though I do not have the final number yet, a number I will share with you in the next week, it appears we had the largest number of people ever worshipping on Christmas Eve. In 2020, we experienced pivot after pivot after pivot, and in so many ways the church has never been as vital and active as it has been in the past year. But it's only a pivot if one foot is firmly planted and does not move. And in today's scripture, we are told where to plant that foot. God has a purpose for this church – and God has a purpose for each one of us and if you are not getting there, if you feel that your life does not yet have a purpose, the reason may be that you have yet to put one foot where it will not be moved. And I thought the way for us to begin this New Year is to renew our commitment to what Jesus calls us to be and to do in this world.

One morning last week, my neighbors caught me in the act. It had snowed the night before and I try to get to their driveways before they notice. They have a snow removal service that comes early to plow their driveways but then the snowplow comes down the street making it difficult for them to get out of the driveways. So either my next door neighbor or I step in and remove the snow after that happens, but I try to do it early because I don't want to be thanked, But on Wednesday morning, I was late and both neighbors came out to talk to me. One of them said to me, "This is a great neighborhood." And I said, "It is a great neighborhood." It is the best neighborhood in which we've lived. But then he said, "You make it that way." Not wanting to acknowledge the small part that I play, I said, "We all do." To have a great neighborhood, it takes us all. And as I returned to my own driveway, this song came to mind: **[video] ("What the world needs now is love sweet love")** That song is a gospel song.

What if LOVE were the defining factor in our lives, where our pivot foot was firmly planted, and that would become the defining factor of this nation and how we treat each other. Some might say that's just "pie in the sky" – but Jesus gave his life for this and it's what I believe is still the

compelling message of the Christian faith. That song came to mind again on Thursday evening when our daughter sent us a text that there was shooting two blocks from their house – and another black man is dead. When I saw the video of George Floyd’s killing, when I see the news reports of crowds that gather protesting the wearing of face masks, when I hear about kids who are bullied, or I talk with adults who feel all alone or depressed or rejected – every time I hear about the pain and brokenness in this world, I think what this world needs now is LOVE. And God longs to give us that. Would you read this with me? **Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.** We can come up with a lot of words to describe God – righteous, holy, merciful, just – but John, from everything he witnessed in the life of Jesus, had come to the conclusion that God is love. And we were made in that image. We were made to love. But that’s not what defines our world which is why there is no much division and conflict. There is something within us that is broken and something in the world that is broken and though we know we should be loving, we find it hard to do. Our emotions get in the way or what we want gets in the way.

The Greek word that the New Testament uses for love is agape. It’s not warm fuzzy feelings, but a kind of moral love, a love that is determined to bless and serve other no matter the risk, no matter the cost. It’s putting the needs of someone else before my needs. We are called to love God – to plant one foot there and then the other foot can move to love others. The question we are to ask: **What is the most living thing I can do in this situation?** And the answer to that question: **Be the bridge.** Be the bridge from God’s love to the needs of the people around you. Be the link from the life of Jesus to the needs of the world. And that’s what this past year has been for us. We could not come into the building so we’ve taken the church into the world.

One day, a man came to Jesus and asked, “What’s the most important commandment in the Law?” And Jesus responds by reciting the Shema from the book of Deuteronomy which is the basic creed of Judaism. **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.** Jesus is saying it starts with our relationship with God – knowing God is committed to you, knowing you belong to God. And then Jesus adds to that: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** If you want to know what God’s will is for your life, it’s not that complicated: Love God and every day when you wake up, your job is to love you neighbor as yourself. And then we pay attention to where the need is and who needs love. That’s what we do. That’s what we do together as the church. It’s not at all complicated. Just be the bridge from God’s love to the needs of others.

And for the year before us, it is as simple as that. I’ll be the first to admit that we don’t always get it right. We mess up or we don’t see the need, and when we mess up, it is important to admit that. But then we keep trying. What sets the church apart from the rest of the world is not that we are better than anyone else, but we are committed to keep trying to do what Jesus calls us to do. I don’t know what we will face in 2021, but I know there are people longing for what Jesus offers. Let’s be the bridge.

For the past year, we’ve been assisting our partner congregation, Iglesias Piedra Viva, as it serve a Latino congregation in south Minneapolis. Last summer, I called to see if there were needs they were unable to meet and I was told about a man who had only recently made a connection with the church. He lives alone and was hospitalized at that point and would begin kidney dialysis as his kidneys had failed. The man had lost his job and was now unable to work. He was one of the people who often falls through the cracks and was not eligible for government assistance – and had no way to pay for the room that he rented. So, I contacted a couple families in our church who had offered to assist if a need was identified. I was hoping we

could provide for this man's rent for three months. It turned out that enough was given to cover his rent for six months. About a month ago, I asked how this man was doing. I was told he joined a Bible study and has become someone who is always encouraging others. Because you were willing to be the bridge of God's love to a person in need, this man has become a bridge for others.

This month, our focus is LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. Each day, look for an opportunity to offer kindness to someone. Send a note. Make a phone call. Provide food. Purchase a gift card and give it the cashier at your grocery store or your mail carrier or the person who picks up your garbage. Be the bridge. Last Wednesday morning, as I put our snow blower back in the garage after my interaction with our neighbors, guess who was blessed the most. It was me for having the opportunity to serve. I was doing what I was designed to do. Be the bridge.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 3, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Monday, January 4

Scripture: Matthew 22:36-40

"Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He replied, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.* This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.* All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

Observation: Jewish rabbis debated: were all commandments equal or was there a greater one? Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus chose not one but two. The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind." But he added Leviticus 19:18: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus said the point of all other truths is to lead us to love God and neighbor more fully. God wants us to show contagious love to all we know.

Application: Jesus said every key Bible principle, all the truths we know about what God wants, "depend" on the two commands he quoted. The second command can be especially challenging. Loving others the way we love ourselves is based on how God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it hard for us to love ourselves or others with God's unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake and the sake of others. What has stopped you or made it hard for you to love yourself or someone else persistently? How might you love more fully?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for loving me unconditionally. Help me to recognize the moments in my life when I can relentlessly love those around me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 5

Scripture: 1 John 4:16-21

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in

us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Observation: Some people think righteous people are not kind, that following Jesus makes you critical and unloving. That was not the apostle John's view! John Wesley, Methodism's founder, preached a sermon on April 21, 1777 that quoted John and invited all followers of Jesus: "Let us provoke all men, not to enmity and contention, but to love and good works; always remembering those deep words... 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!'"

Application: Why would John say, "Perfect love drives out fear"? 1 John 4:20 said, "Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars." Do you agree that it is often fear that leads us to hate other people? Why would hating others block any genuine love for God? Can you think of practical ways to let God's perfect love move you in the direction of acting in love toward others, even if you think they deserve fear and distrust rather than love? In what ways has following Christ made you and your relationships more loving?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you embodied God's love for me. Now you call me to embody your love as I deal with other people, even people I may not like, or may even fear. Grow your love in my heart. Amen.

Wednesday, January 6

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:1-8, 11-12; Luke 15:1-7

The LORD's word came to me: Human one, prophesy against Israel's shepherds. Prophesy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims to the shepherds: Doom to Israel's shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn't shepherds tend the flock? You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don't tend the flock. You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice. Without a shepherd, my flock was scattered; and when it was scattered, it became food for all the wild animals. My flock strayed on all the mountains and on every high hill throughout all the earth. My flock was scattered, and there was no one to look for them or find them. So now shepherds, hear the LORD's word! This is what the LORD God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn't seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn't tend my flock.

The LORD God proclaims: I myself will search for my flock and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out the flock when some in the flock have been scattered, so will I seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered during the time of clouds and thick darkness.

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he

arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

Observation: Jesus, God in the flesh, came to this planet on a very real rescue mission. Drawing from the image in Ezekiel 34, Jesus told a story about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. That was only 1% of the flock, but the shepherd cared deeply about any lost sheep. He dropped everything, searched until he found that sheep—and felt great joy when he found it. Jesus' critics thought he should write off the human lost sheep (Luke 15:2), but Jesus in fact searched tirelessly for them.

Application: Ezekiel's metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure that the sheep are protected and fed. Instead it focuses on the remedial duties, caring for the sick and finding the lost. These equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated and disenfranchised people. What are some of the ways you can actively support and work for justice for alienated or disenfranchised people around you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that you've never seen me (or anyone) as disposable, as someone who doesn't matter. Give me your heart for everyone in your human family. Amen.

Thursday, January 7

Scripture: Romans 13:8-10

Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

Observation: Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches (there were no big cathedrals in his day). Some were mainly Jewish; others mostly Gentile. Their standards of righteousness varied (see Romans 14:1-15:13). It was easy for them to criticize each other. Paul said the purpose of God's law or rules is to help us love. "Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor" was a big challenge to people who disagreed. It was (and is) vital, because "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law."

Application: How might ugly religious conflicts (e.g. the Salem witch trials, the Inquisition) have been different if Christians had always aimed to fulfill the law by loving? How can you stand for truths that matter to you without acting in unloving ways toward those who disagree? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grow in the inner qualities (that may not come naturally) that help you live out the law of love.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, "love is what fulfills the Law" sometimes feels too easy to me. Until, that is, I try to do it. Then I realize how high and hard a standard that really is. Teach me how to love the way that you love. Amen.

Friday, January 8

Scripture: Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 19:1-10

Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest."

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

Observation: Our reason to be as a congregation grows from Jesus' actions and teaching. Jesus was a man on a mission. He did many admirable, valuable things during his ministry on earth. He healed the sick, broke down barriers of prejudice and exclusion, taught people how to live better lives, and challenged religious hypocrisy. Yet all that grew from his one central mission. First and foremost, Jesus said, he came to seek and to save the lost.

Application: Jesus said he "came to seek and save the lost." In his commentary, William Barclay wrote, "In the New Testament 'lost' does not mean damned or doomed. It just means in the wrong place....A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the...family of his Father." In what ways has God found you, and given you your rightful place in God's family? When have you been able to help God find someone else?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming "to seek and save the lost," including me. Guide me to the ways I can join you in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.

Saturday, January 9

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Observation: We'll use these compelling passages to end each week in this series, "Love Your Neighbor." Paul was emphatically practical in his letters to the Christians in Ephesus and Corinth. He would have grown up reciting the *Shema*, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus, Paul's Lord, said that was the greatest commandment, and added, "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The next logical question for Paul, like Jesus' followers ever since, was, "What does it look like to love my neighbor?" These were his answers. It looks like being humble – not thinking of yourself more highly than others. It looks like being gentle – take a deep breath if you feel angry, speak carefully. It looks like being patient – while waiting, focus on God instead of yourself. Love requires compassion (suffering with others), kindness (honor and consideration) and forgiveness to all God's children.

Application: As you read this list of loving actions, how do you feel? Great? Guilty? Condemned? If you're not perfectly living this list, remember none of us are. Start with, how can you be more loving this week? Instead of trying to grow in all areas at once, choose one characteristic Paul lists and focus on living into a new way of loving. And loving attitudes and actions are both individual and public, local and general. Think more broadly than just yourself. What can your family, your community, your church, your city, your state, your nation do to be more loving to people you've never met? How can you join in God's work to extend divine love to all people?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to love all my neighbors, everywhere. Help me start close to home and guide me as I expand my vision to be more and more like your vast, world-changing vision. Amen.