

Love Your Neighbor: 2. Finding Common Ground
Acts 17:22-28
January 10, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Words matter. In fact, the words that we use have consequences. Never has that been clearer than this past week. As someone who spends hours every week trying to craft the right words, I know their importance in shaping thoughts and behavior. And if you've been listening to me for any length of time, I think you already know that. There are times when I don't get the words right, and that's usually when my emotions get in the way or I'm focused on my own self-interest. And when that happens, I'm grateful for those of you who hold me accountable or ask for clarification. Before I stand here on a Sunday, I've already rehearsed these words with Amanda and after this service, we review these words to be sure that I got the words right. And what makes for the "right" words? I still remember a conversation that we had in my 7th grade history class about freedom of speech. The example our teacher used was standing up in a crowded movie theater and shouting "Fire" when there was no fire in an effort to create panic in the room. She said, the word Fire may be legal and shouting fire where there is no fire might be legal, but that doesn't make it right. Your words have power. Use them wisely, she said. I've never forgotten that. Words may be legal but that doesn't make them right. The question that I presented again last week: **What is the most loving thing I can do in a situation? What is the most loving thing I say?** Sometimes that means telling the truth even when I don't want to hear the truth. What's the most loving thing? **The answer: Be the bridge.** Be the bridge from God's love to the needs of others. Build up. Lift up. Love.

In the opening words of the Gospel of John, we are told – **in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God – and that Word became flesh and made his home among us.** John was reminding us that words have power. Jesus who came into the world in first century Palestine was the Word of God, the creative expression of God. And as Jesus walked this earth, his words had and still have the power to inspire and move us to create a better world. As followers of Jesus, our primary task is to build up, to lift up, and to love. The Greatest Commandment – which Jesus said summarizes everything we find in scripture and everything we learn from his life. He's saying, if you don't remember anything else about me and what I came here to teach, remember this: **Love God and Love your neighbor.**

After a week in which the words of our President incited violence directed at the heart of our democracy and a whole lot of people who put his words into action to tear down and destroy, after what we observed this past week, we need the teaching of Jesus now as ever. I don't think it is accidental that our theme for this month is Love Your Neighbor. Two thousand years after Jesus gave us the Great Commandment, his followers still struggle with this.

Religion is part of what divides us as a nation and around the world. One of the more disturbing images that I saw during Wednesday's attack on the capitol was this one. [*photo of a large banner with the word Jesus being hung at the capitol*] Too often through history, the name of Jesus gets associated with efforts to attack and tear down. which is part of why it can be so hard for Christians to get along. And religion becomes one of those topics we don't talk about. We don't want to be associated with conservative Christians or liberal Christians – or whatever assumption people may have about Christians. Remember who Jesus chose to be his disciples? There was Simon the Zealot who believed the Romans should be driven from Israel by force if necessary. And there was Matthew a tax collector who worked for the Romans. They were political opposites. Imagine the conversations at their dinner table! Why would Jesus do that? Because it was easy – he wants his disciples to be bridges and not barriers. What we find

in scripture is that Jesus was constantly teaching his disciples to forgive each other, to love each other, and not judge each other. Here's what Matthew tells us Jesus said to his disciples **Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. You'll receive the same judgment you give... Why do you see the splinter that's in your brother's or sister's eye but don't notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, "Let me take the splinter out of your eye," when there's log in your eye? You deceive yourself!** Jesus knows it's easy to see what's wrong with somebody else and miss where we stumble and struggle and fall. For Jesus, the defining character of what it means to follow is not how much you know but how much you love. The Greek word that gets used is Agape – which is this determination to bless and serve another person no matter the risk, no matter the cost. It is putting the needs of others above and beyond our own.

Methodists follow the legacy of our founder John Wesley. Wesley talked about sanctification, moving on to perfection – being perfected in love. To be a Methodist does not mean we see ourselves as the best church, but a church that opens our doors, wanting to befriend others. In a sermon that he titled "Catholic Spirit." (Catholic with a small "c" meaning universal) He defines this universal spirit of a Methodist: **If your heart is as my heart, lend me your hand.** We can disagree about a lot and still be brothers and sisters. We share a lot if common if we will make the time and effort to love each other.

In Acts 17, Paul is in Athens. There are no Christians in Athens, but there were all these temples to various gods. Paul starts preaching about Christianity and the philosophers are confused. They have never heard about this religion. So the philosophers invite Paul to Mars Hill, a rock outcropping that overlooks the city. From this vantage point, one can see all of the temples in the city. They ask Paul to tell them more, and what Paul does is to find common ground. **"People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship,** (Paul is affirming them, not judging or condemning. I see you are religious, and I'm religious.) **I even found an altar with this inscription "To an unknown God."** (They did that in case they missed a god) **What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you.** And he proceeds to tell them about the God made known to us in Jesus. Paul even quotes from their own poets and philosophers. Paul is focused on common ground. Surely God love everyone. God created everyone and that means God created Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists.

Five years ago, a group called Tapestry was formed in Plymouth. This group has brought together well over 200 women – Christian, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. Last week I spoke with two of the founders of this group, Leslee Jaeger, a member of Messiah, and Farhana Ali, a member of Northwest Islamic Center. I asked them how this group began. **[video clip]** We tend to seek out persons who are like us, who share similar values, interests, and beliefs which can be a good thing, but it keeps us in a silo – not that we don't want to associate with others, we just don't get acquainted with people outside our silo. But Tapestry offers the opportunity to step outside our own silos. **[video clip]** In December 2015, I invited Tamim Saidi to speak to us in worship. In the fall of 2015 there were suicide bombings in Paris that killed and injured hundreds of people. It was referred to as the Paris equivalent of our 9/11 terrorist attacks – and the news and social media was filled with disparaging comments about Muslims and how they should be banned from this country. And I felt we often fear what we don't understand. So I invited Tamim and Bishop Bruce Ough to provide our sermon on the Sunday after Christmas. We were looking for common ground. And I remember many of you were genuinely interested in learning more about Islam. But we lost people that day. There were people who were upset that I would allow a person of another religion to speak in worship – even though what Tamim referenced that day was the importance of Jesus' teaching to Muslims – in other words, common ground. I still have

this idea that we could somehow be a bridge, a bridge of God's love in this community. That the first thing people in this community would say about Messiah Church is "see how they love." I asked Farhana and Leslee about how Tapestry might be one of the bridges in our community. **[video clip]** Common Ground.

I've devoted my adult life to bringing people to Jesus. I want everyone to know his way of life, and that way is to love. And in the midst of all the pain and brokenness of our world, we will either be part of the problem or part of the solution. I don't convert anyone. God does that. I also don't judge anyone. God does that. Our job is to love our Christian friends, even those with whom we disagree, and to love persons of different faiths and no faith at all. For the past two decades, at the end of every service, I call us to love – may God's love be so much a part of your life, that those to whom love is a stranger, will find in you the most generous of friends. Our words matter – and so do our actions. Let our lives be the example this world needs of what God's love looks like.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 10, 2021

Weekly Prayer: O God, because we have been given so much, help us to give more. Because we are loved so much, give us the strength to love more. Because we are accepted as we are, give us the grace to accept others without judgment or prejudice. We give ourselves to you as we listen to your call to love all our neighbors. Amen.

Monday, January 11

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him." When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*" Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Observation: Who were these wise men (the Greek is *magoi*) who came from the East seeking the newborn "King of the Jews"? They weren't kings (in spite of what we hear in the Christmas carol), and the text never said how many there were. "From the east" probably meant they were Persian, most likely Zoroastrian students of the stars. They followed an unexpected star toward the alluring hope that a new King offered the world a fresh start.

Application: The followers of a foreign religion may have tracked the star for as much as 18-24 months. (After their visit, Herod brutally ordered the death of every boy 2 years old and younger.) Yet when these wealthy foreigners "saw the child with Mary his mother [a poor

peasant girl],” they fell to their knees and “honored him.” What does that tell you about the God who invited Zoroastrians through the stars and valued their worship of the newborn king?

Prayer: Lord of the whole world, you didn’t want only people with the “correct” theology to share heaven’s joy at Jesus’ birth. Thank you for caring enough to reach far beyond human boundaries to share that joy. Amen.

Tuesday, January 12

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3; Jeremiah 29:1-7

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.”

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter from Jerusalem to the few surviving elders among the exiles, to the priests and the prophets, and to all the people Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon from Jerusalem. The letter was sent after King Jeconiah, the queen mother, the court officials, the government leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen and smiths had left Jerusalem. It was delivered to Babylon by Elasah, Shaphan’s son, and Gemariah, Hilkiyah’s son—two men dispatched to Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar by King Zedekiah. The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don’t dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

Observation: God made great promises to Abraham, including “a land I will show you” and “I will bless you.” Such promises tempt human nature to think, “God likes me more than anyone else!” But God blessed Abraham so that he and his descendants would share the blessing: “All the families of earth will be blessed because of you.” And after Babylon’s brutal capture of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah urged the Israelite exiles to pray for the prosperity and peace – of Babylon! Even as defeated exiles, he urged them to love their neighbors.

Application: Jeremiah was calling Israel’s exiles to be both smart and generous. People aren’t being urged to seek the welfare of their own city but to commit themselves to a city where they don’t belong and that they think they’ll soon leave. They’re to seek the welfare of the city where they’re forced to live because their own welfare is tied up with that city. How does the prophet’s message point to why it’s important for you and your church family to better love your neighbors?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you wanted Abraham to care about blessing “all the families of earth.” Plant that kind of heart in me, too, as one of Abraham’s spiritual descendants. Amen.

Wednesday, January 13

Scripture: Jonah 4:1-11

But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, “Come on, LORD! Wasn’t this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of

faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, LORD, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live.” The LORD responded, “Is your anger a good thing?” But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, “It’s better for me to die than to live.” God said to Jonah, “Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?” Jonah said, “Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!” But the LORD said, “You ‘pitied’ the shrub, for which you didn’t work and which you didn’t raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. Yet for my part, can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Observation: What did Jonah think was “utterly wrong”? He hoped to see Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, leveled! But Jonah 3:10 said, “God stopped planning to destroy [the people of Nineveh], and he didn’t do it.” The Hebrew Scriptures included this story, not to endorse Jonah’s attitude, but through God’s challenge to the angry prophet to show that God’s caring and love truly extends to the whole world.

Application: The story of Jonah ended with a question, not a statement. God asked Jonah, “Can’t I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can’t tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” Is there any person or group of people you’d rather see God “zap” than to see them repent? Is it right for God to extend heaven’s offer of mercy to all people?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes, like Jonah, I wish you’d hate people I hate. But you call me to change my attitude, not yours. Guide and lead me as I wrestle with that change of spirit. Amen.

Thursday, January 14

Scripture: John 4:27-40; Matthew 28:16-20

Just then, Jesus’ disciples arrived and were shocked that he was talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who has told me everything I’ve done! Could this man be the Christ?” They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus. In the meantime the disciples spoke to Jesus, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” Jesus said to them, “I have food to eat that you don’t know about.” The disciples asked each other, “Has someone brought him food?” Jesus said to them, “I am fed by doing the will of the one who sent me and by completing his work. Don’t you have a saying, ‘Four more months and then it’s time for harvest’? Look, I tell you: open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest. Those who harvest are receiving their pay and gathering fruit for eternal life so that those who sow and those who harvest can celebrate together. This is a true saying, that one sows and another harvests. I have sent you to harvest what you didn’t work hard for; others worked hard, and you will share in their hard work.” Many Samaritans in that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s word when she testified, “He told me everything I’ve ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Observation: Jesus' disciples seemed to think no sharing could do any good in the hostile territory of Samaria. Jesus modeled an important spiritual vision for them. "Open your eyes," he said, "and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest" (verse 35). Jesus' actions in Samaria were an early preview of the Great Commission he gave his followers. It included (and includes) caring about "all nations," making continual choices to invest our energy and talents in making the lives of others better.

Application: John 4:27 said Jesus' disciples were "shocked" to see him talking to the woman at the well. They might have understood him shaming her about her racial or moral inferiority. But he offered her "living water" (verse 10) and told her he was the Messiah everyone hoped for (verse 26). In short, he treated her like any other human being he cared about and came to save. How can Jesus' example upgrade the way you treat and relate to any "Samaritan women" you encounter?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me anew this week to recognize and value your image in myself, and in all the people, male and female, happy and hurting, who cross my path. Amen.

Friday, January 15

Scripture: Acts 17:16-34

While Paul waited for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to find that the city was flooded with idols. He began to interact with the Jews and Gentile God-worshippers in the synagogue. He also addressed whoever happened to be in the marketplace each day. Certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers engaged him in discussion too. Some said, "What an amateur! What's he trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods." (They said this because he was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) They took him into custody and brought him to the council on Mars Hill. "What is this new teaching? Can we learn what you are talking about? You've told us some strange things and we want to know what they mean." (They said this because all Athenians as well as the foreigners who live in Athens used to spend their time doing nothing but talking about or listening to the newest thing.) Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, "People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown God.' What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn't live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore, as God's offspring, we have no need to imagine that the divine being is like a gold, silver, or stone image made by human skill and thought. God overlooks ignorance of these things in times past, but now directs everyone everywhere to change their hearts and lives. This is because God has set a day when he intends to judge the

world justly by a man he has appointed. God has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some began to ridicule Paul. However, others said, “We’ll hear from you about this again.” At that, Paul left the council. Some people joined him and came to believe, including Dionysius, a member of the council on Mars Hill, a woman named Damaris, and several others.

Observation: On his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul spent time in Athens, the capital for “other religions” in his day. Athens was what we might call a university town, with lots of novelty-loving philosophers. Given a chance to speak to a gathering on Mars Hill, Paul declared his own faith winningly while giving a model for dealing respectfully and lovingly with people of different faith traditions.

Application: Some people would expect the apostle Paul (and Christians after him) to denounce the Athenians as pagan libertines and idolaters, going straight to hell. But Paul’s actual sermon had a respectful, inclusive tone. (In verse 28, he quoted a Cretan philosopher named Epimenides and the Stoic poet Aratus.) Was quoting pagan writers “selling out” his faith? How can openness to faiths and cultures other than your own allow you to create conversation rather than condemnation?

Prayer: King Jesus, when Paul preached in Athens, he quoted Greek poets and Cretan philosophers. Help me to know the culture around me well enough that I can use it to communicate without letting that culture subvert my faith. Amen.

Saturday, January 16

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: Nowhere in Scripture will you find instructions that say, “Treat your neighbors with kindness, unless their beliefs differ from yours.” Implicit in Paul’s instructions was the understanding that we are to treat all people with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are, in fact, to love all people. Admittedly, this becomes more complicated when people’s fundamental beliefs are not the same as yours. Rather than looking at this as a problem and trying to “fix” them, Paul said (see Romans 14:1-15:7), see it as a way to love extravagantly, working to find unity in unexpected places.

Application: John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, said in a sermon titled “A Catholic Spirit,” “Even though a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may.” How did Paul’s teachings in today’s readings shape Wesley’s theology? Is there someone in your life with whom you do not think alike, yet you need to love alike?

Prayer: Compassionate God, help me to major in majors and minor in minors—and leave the judging to you. Help me to “put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” Amen.