

## Love Your Neighbor: 3. Love is the Way

Luke 10:25-29

January 17, 2021

Pastor Steve Richards

This month, our focus is Love Your Neighbor. Two thousand years ago, Jesus gave the world the Great Commandment – He was and is still calling us to a life centered in God’s kind of love, a love that is doggedly determined to bless and serve others no matter the risks, no matter the costs. And once we have that center, we can become the bridge that is needed in this world, a bridge from God’s love to the needs in this world. That work is far from finished. There are great divides in this world, among them is a racial divide. This is the weekend when we remember the dream that Martin Luther King Jr. brought to this nation – a dream where we will be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin. We don’t yet live in that world, but Jesus gave us the Way to get there.

Last week, I was able, through zoom, to have a conversation with Dr. Fayneese Miller, president of Hamline University. I serve on Hamline’s Board of Trustees and have had an opportunity to get acquainted with her over the past five years that she has served as Hamline’s president. I want you to hear part of her story and her perspective on bridging the racial divide.

**You can watch and listen to the interview at this website:**

<https://vimeo.com/500613201>

Let’s return to our scripture for today. After hearing the Great Commandment, the legal expert asked for a definition of neighbor. Who is my neighbor? And Jesus told a story that turned the first century definition of neighbor upside down. A man, a Jewish man, was beaten, robbed and left for dead alongside a road. That day three different people would see that man – a priest, a levite, and a Samaritan. Which one would stop to help? Obviously it would be the priest and the Levite, because a good Jew would never associate with a Samaritan – and a Samaritan would not associate with a Jew, even if one’s life depended on it. But if you know the story, Jesus turned preconceived notions upside down. A Samaritan saves a Jew’s life. You have to get close enough to do that. We are not truly neighbors until we get close enough.

Last summer, many of us walked with hundreds of others in a protest march from Parker’s Lake to Plymouth City Hall. It was the killing of George Floyd that prompted the march but I was walking so I could get close enough to hear the pain and the frustration of living in a world where it is too often the color of one’s skin and not the content of one’s character that determines what is good. I grew up singing the song, where children of all colors and ethnicities *are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.* It was easy in my childhood world where everyone looked like me to believe that’s how the world worked. But what I’ve discovered since then is the importance of getting close enough to each other, to hear each other’s story, to feel the pain and struggles that others bear – and to share my own with others – to do the hard work necessary to embody the love that Jesus calls us to live. That’s what it means to love your neighbor.

John Wesley gave us words that I think put legs on Martin Luther King’s dream. These are also the words that Fayneese Miller was referring to that guide community life at Hamline University: **Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you**

**can.** I think that's what being a bridge looks like. Let's be that kind of bridge in this community in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 17, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** God of us all, you make the world your neighborhood. Opening yourself to all, you care for those in special need, of body, mind or soul. Help us to live as neighbors even when our differences would keep us apart. Teach us how to love each other unconditionally. Unite us with brothers and sisters everywhere as neighbors of yours, and ours. We pray in your name. Amen.

### **Monday, January 18**

#### **Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12**

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

**Observation:** This definitive passage said that loving one another grows out of our identification with the heart of the God of the universe. It isn't just that God loves us, John wrote. God IS love. If the creator's love is the ultimate source of our life, there is power in love. On this day when we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. he said in a speech in 1967 titled "Where do we go from here": *"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic."*

**Application:** The Greek word agape was not the emotional "luv" of pop culture (which can be temporary). Agape was a chosen attitude and action. Dr. King also said: *"Everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."* How can you choose to love with a "heart full of grace"?

**Prayer:** Dear God, you ARE love—what a mind-stretching truth. You know it's not quite as natural for me to love. Please keep loving me as you stretch my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.

### **Tuesday, January 19**

#### **Scripture: Acts 17:2-8**

As was Paul's custom, he entered the synagogue and for three Sabbaths interacted with them on the basis of the scriptures. Through his interpretation of the scriptures, he demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He declared, "This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ." Some were convinced and joined Paul and Silas, including a larger number of Greek God-worshippers and quite a few prominent women. But the Jews became jealous and brought along some thugs who were hanging out in the marketplace. They formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's house, intending to bring Paul and Silas before the people. When they didn't find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city officials. They were shouting, "These people who have been disturbing the peace throughout

the empire have also come here. What is more, Jason has welcomed them into his home. Every one of them does what is contrary to Caesar's decrees by naming someone else as king: Jesus." This provoked the crowd and the city officials even more.

**Observation:** Love isn't just spiritual. It changes the world right now. The movement of Jesus' followers was turning the world upside down, and was because members of the movement gave their loyalty to someone named Jesus and committed themselves to living and witnessing to his way above all else. The way of Jesus will always turn our worlds and the world upside down, which is really turning it right-side up.

**Application:** Opposing people or systems in power will often feel like turning the world upside down. Whether in your home, your work, your friendships, or your community and nation, those in power tend to want to stay in power, even if they aren't using their power in ways that fit with God's principles. Can you name a time when you opposed a powerful force for reasons of principle? What was the outcome? Regardless of the visible outcome, how did doing that affect your inner self?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I don't want to maintain the status quo. I'm ready for you to be in charge, to upset my life in the best way possible. Help me be a part of creating a world that is right-side-up. Amen.

**Wednesday, January 20**

**Scripture: Song of Solomon 8:6-7**

Set me as a seal over your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is as strong as death,  
passionate love unrelenting as the grave.  
Its darts are darts of fire—  
divine flame!  
Rushing waters can't quench love;  
rivers can't wash it away.  
If someone gave all his estate in exchange for love,  
he would be laughed to utter shame.

**Observation:** Putting Song of Solomon in the Hebrew Scriptures (guided, we believe, by the Holy Spirit) showed vividly that God created and affirms human love. The unmarried apostle Paul hinted that God gives some the gift of living celibate happily (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2-7), but the Scripture never said a celibate person is holier than one who faithfully loves another. Hopefully, you have seen and/or experienced the beauty and holiness of committed human love.

**Application:** The passionate poetry in today's reading saw human love growing out of God's love, extending and expressing it. The phrase "Its darts are darts of fire—divine flame!" was literally, in Hebrew, "a flame of Yah" (the short form of the divine name from Exodus 3:14). How did that phrase make our ability to love more than a simple biological drive, and link it to God's serving, self-sacrificing love?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you created me out of your love, and you planted a seed of that love deep within me. Let me always value and respect the holiness of that wonderful gift from your heart. Amen.

## Thursday, January 21

### Scripture: John 3:3-8

Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom." Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**Observation:** Life is a major theme from the very start of the gospel of John (John 1:3-5). So it made sense that, when Jesus met the cautious Pharisee Nicodemus (he sought Jesus in the dark of night), Jesus used the image of birth to point to the new quality of life he offered. He said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." In the Greek it can be translated born again, born anew, or born from above. Maybe Jesus is saying the reason to be born is so that you can live. God wants you to live.

**Application:** Most members of the group called the Pharisees (from a Hebrew word that meant "set apart") opposed Jesus' ministry. At times, Jesus felt anger at their hard-hearted "righteousness" (Mark 3:5). Yet he never wrote them all off as "enemies" or "hopeless." When a Pharisee like Nicodemus showed any willingness, however tentative, to listen, Jesus responded in love. What does his conversation in today's reading teach you about one aspect of loving your neighbor?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you've never written me off; you never will. I open my heart to your Spirit's work in giving me the refreshing, renewing gift of new life. Amen.

## Friday, January 22

### Scripture: John 13:34-35, 15:9-10

"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.

"As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.

**Observation:** The setting of Jesus' "new commandment" showed that loving is much more than warm, fuzzy sentiment. This was not long before Jesus' death, when he would show what love looks like; giving of the self, even sacrificing the self for the good and well-being of others. The command to love one another was not new, but "as I have loved you" took love to a whole new level.

**Application:** Jesus began John 15:9 with ten key words: "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." As the moon reflects the sun's light, our love for others reflects God's love for us. In

what practical ways do you live out your commitment to love God and others? We often fall short, but this kind of love is willing to do the hard work of binding wounds and working to reconcile. How does it bring you strength to know Jesus' love for you is rooted in God's eternal love? How can we live out Jesus' committed, steady love toward one another and our neighbors?

**Prayer:** O Lord, help me increasingly to love, not as an outward disguise to hide my anger or pain, but from my heart as your love overflows and bubbles out of me to bless others. Amen.

**Saturday, January 23**

**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 end each week of the GPS for this sermon series with these two passages. Our "Love your neighbor" series is rooted in the kind of life to which these verses called God's people. Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in all of human history; a movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world; a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself. Want to change the world? Come join in loving your neighbor!

**Application:** "As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other." Sound simple? The perceptive British Christian C. S. Lewis found that it isn't as simple as it sounds: "I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me....I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me....Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances....that [real forgiveness] we can always have from God if we ask for it." How have you learned that you can't genuinely forgive without loving, and can't genuinely love without a willingness to forgive?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, give me clarity about my daily need for your forgiving, empowering grace to nurture and grow me. And grow me into a person who makes forgiving and loving a rhythm of my life. Amen.