

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque,
on September 6, 2020.

Matthew 18:15-20
Romans 13:8-10

Last time these lectionary passages came up, I focused on the reading from Matthew, in which Jesus offers a three-step process for dealing with conflict in the church. So, this morning I want to focus on the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans instead.

In this passage, Paul appears to be taking his cue directly from the words of Jesus. Remember when Jesus was asked which commandment in the law is the greatest? Jesus chose one from the book of Deuteronomy, a text that was central to the liturgy and life of the Jewish community: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment," Jesus said. "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" which comes from the book of Leviticus. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," Jesus said. For Jesus, love of God and love of neighbor were to be at the core of one's faith and life.

Well, Paul is saying very much the same thing in his letter to the church in Rome: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." All of the commandments, Paul says, "are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

The Greek word that Paul uses here for love is *agape*. In contrast to other Greek words for love – *eros*, which refers to romantic love, and *philia*, which refers to the reciprocal love of friendship – *agape* refers to God's love, the pure, selfless, unconditional love that God has for us and that we are called to have for one another. *Agape* involves making the choice to intentionally desire and deliberately strive for the highest good of others without expecting anything in return.

It's not easy to love our neighbors in this way, particularly when it comes to people we are afraid of, people we don't particularly like, or people with whom we vehemently disagree. Think of a homeless person on the street in the grips of addiction, a poor immigrant from another culture, a neighbor you don't speak to, a family member with whom you don't get along. Democrats -- think of Republicans. Republicans -- think of Democrats. Love one another? Sometimes it's all we can do just to stand one another!

In such cases, loving "the other" becomes a sheer act of will. I will see that person as a child of God and treat him or her with care and respect, in spite of our differences. I will treat that person as I myself would like to be treated, whether my actions are reciprocated or not.

This understanding of love is echoed in M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*. He defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or

another's spiritual growth." Listen to that again: love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

What a great definition of love! In loving yourself -- really loving yourself, not just satisfying your own personal appetites and desires -- you extend yourself in order to nurture your own spiritual growth. Similarly, in loving others, you put yourself out there in order to help nurture the spiritual growth of others. This is more than the warm, fuzzy feeling of love. This is a deeper, more enduring love -- the love of God acting in the human heart. It is love in action!

There was a young military family trying to adjust to a father's first deployment overseas. His wife and son missed him a great deal and did their best to cope with everyday life in his absence. As a family, they had to learn a new way of living together. One night after supper, while the mother was washing the dishes, her son came up to her and said, "Mom, I love you." The mother was touched by his show of affection. She dried her hands on a towel and then warmly hugged her son and said, "Jerry, I love you, too; but you know what I really need? I need you to show your love for me by picking up your clothes and taking out the trash."

How do we show our love for others? With a hug or a kind word? Sure. But more importantly, we show our love for others through our concrete actions. Love is a verb.

When we hand out bag lunches to hungry people who come to our church's door on Sunday mornings, we are loving our neighbors. When we join with Bread for the World in writing letters to Congress urging members to protect funding for programs that help poor and hungry people, we are showing our love for neighbors at home and abroad. When we support the ministries of HopeWorks, FaithWorks, and Habitat, we are loving our neighbors across Albuquerque. When we advocate for public policies in our city and state that serve the common good, we are showing our love for neighbors.

It's not always easy to love our neighbors in the best of times. It is especially difficult (some would say impossible) at such a time as this, when politicians and pundits sow division in our country along lines of race, religion, and class. Instead of promoting love of neighbor, they promote hate and fear of "the other." And there is a ripple effect. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, White nationalist hate groups have increased by 55% since 2017. In Portland, Oregon, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and right here in Albuquerque, we have seen tense standoffs between anti-racist protesters and right-wing militia groups that have ended in bloodshed. And even after months of protests against police killing unarmed people of color, new cases keep being added to the list. Rayshard Brooks, an unarmed Black man, was shot and killed by police in Atlanta, Georgia, in mid-June. And Jacob Blake, another unarmed Black man, was shot seven times by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in late August.

With the 2020 election season in full swing, some Republicans are warning that a win for the Democrats will mean chaos in the streets and an end to the American way of life. Some Democrats, on the other hand, are claiming that a win for the Republicans will mean authoritarian rule and an end to democracy as we know it. We are a nation deeply divided, a people profoundly polarized. Instead of seeing others as neighbors, we are being urged to see others as enemies, as potential threats, as people to be feared.

“We become neighbors when we are willing to cross the road for one another,” wrote the Dutch Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen. And “there is a lot of road crossing to do,” he said. “We are all very busy in our own circles. We have our own people to go to and our own affairs to take care of. But if we could cross the road once in a while and pay attention to what is happening on the other side, we might indeed become neighbors.”

The message we keep hearing over and over from the world is “fear the other.” Fear people who are different from you -- people with different skin color, people from other countries, people with different religions. By contrast, the message we hear from Jesus and Paul is “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Fear can be powerful. It’s true. But love is stronger. “There is no fear in love . . . perfect love casts out fear,” the First Letter of John tells us. So “love your neighbor as yourself” boldly and bravely. For as the editor of *Sojourners* magazine, Jim Wallis, points out, it’s “still the most transformational ethic in history.” Amen.