

## “Love”

*Luke 10:25-37 & Matthew 5:44*

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July 3, 2016

For 26 years, Pastor John Buchan prayed for God to “startle us” before sharing a sermon and ended worship with “hold to the good”. John said, “Startle us,” because religion can become routine even though it is about the stunning ideas that there is a God who created us and everything that is, that the world itself is full of the beauty and glory of its creator, that human beings are created in God’s image, that God came to live among us in Jesus and in him has promised to be with us and love us every day of our lives and beyond and to free us from anything that oppresses, confines, threatens, even the fear of death and death itself. Somehow we manage to make that boring. So I pray “startle us” because I, too, need the reminder that the world is alive with God, our God is a God of surprises and unlikely grace and blessed intrusions into our lives. “Hold to the good,” because God’s love as we know it in Jesus Christ is always inspiring and enabling the good to happen in this world; and because, you and I are called by God to live out that love by doing good, promoting good, advocating for and voting for and giving our resources for and living for “the good” in the world.

**“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”** Jesus said **Matthew 5:44 NRSV** **“I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

In the parable of the Good Samaritan the lawyer was an expert in the law of Moses, a person who devoted his life to studying and teaching the Old Testament, a person striving to serve God by helping people understand God’s will at the Temple. The Levite is a temple worker, a teaching assistant. The lawyer would have viewed a priest and a Levite as being similar to himself, a person who devotes his life to serving God through his religion. Amy-Jill Levine explains that “Samaritans were the despised enemies of the Jews. Listeners would have expected a Jew to be the hero of Jesus’ story, instead they would have been shocked to hear that it is a Samaritan. The parable offers a vision of life rather than death. It insists that enemies can prove to be neighbors, that compassion has no boundaries, and that judging people on the basis of their religion or ethnicity will leave us dying in a ditch.” One person explained a modern day update as a pastor, Christian education director, and Osama bin Laden.

**“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”**

Our neighbor is anyone who needs help. We are to love everyone, despite every difference. Think of the most “other” person from you. You are to love them. You are to help them. If we are to truly follow Jesus we must take risks to love everyone, even if loving a person costs us our status, career, or life. Loving God means loving everyone. Love is more than a feeling. Love is action, compassion, caring for everyone.

John Buchanan laments the aspect of religion that defines boundaries, who is in and who is out, who is friend and who is enemy. It is deeply embedded in us and has produced some of history’s most deplorable incidents. Too often religion fuels conflict, war, and ethnic cleansing. In this regard, Christianity is no better

than other religions. We have a history of hating, harming, and slaughtering non-Christians. We have a history of killing Christians who perceived a few things differently in other Christian denomination. Today in the United States we still have Christians hating “other” people, trying to legislate their view, saying that it is God’s will that certain “other” people die, a few are still even declaring that people who believe differently should be killed.

John Buchanan said, “But here is another idea, a better idea: a religion that transcends the boundaries and reaches out; religion that is “moved by compassion” and regards the other, whomever he or she is, as a beloved child of God, deserving of love and care and compassion and acceptance and dignity and freedom and full life—black-white, male-female, rich-poor, Muslim-Jew, Republican-Democrat, liberal-conservative. Goodness, according to Jesus, is having compassion for another human being, regardless of who he or she is, doing what is necessary to help. What else are we here for, if not that? There is growing evidence that American culture is sick of religion that divides, judges, casts out, keeps out, and it longs for a religion that reconciles, affirms, accepts; a religion that simply, profoundly, in every way it can, ‘holds to the good.’” A religion that loves everyone.

Kenneth Randolph said, “The Samaritan should always be the most “other” person one can name. Sometimes our religious beliefs and practices obstruct active compassion. I am convinced that most religious people seek to obey divine will as they understand it. But too often many of us do not love our neighbor. Too often we make excuses. Too often we therefore sow the seeds not only of destruction of others but also of ourselves.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. named three groups, or philosophies, found in the parable: the “robbers; the way of the world; and the neighbor”. The robbers are those whose attitude is: “What is yours is mine. And if you don’t give it to me I’ll take it from you.” We might not be people who are mugging others, or defrauding them, but we also are more aware these days of how our standard of living that we feel we have a reasonable right to, has adverse effects on those living in other parts of the world. Are we robbing when we consume the majority of the world’s resources? Are those in the 1% that continue to strive for more by taking advantage of others, creating barriers for others and failing to give anything to the world robbing? If you have more than \$61,000 in assets, then you are in the top 10% of wealth in the world. Are you a robber or lover? Societies that allow the elite through laws to legally rob the poor create unrest, strife, and robbers. Societies which seek to bring dignity to all produce few robbers. The good news of the kingdom of God is grace that transforms the world into a community where every person is loved, has freedom, food, shelter, clothes, and health care.

Dr. King’s second group is the way of the world. We are all familiar with the phrase, “Well, that is the way things are and you can’t do much about it.” The priest and the Levite were indifferent. Indifference is the opposite of love. Matt Damon in his speech to MIT graduates urged them to engage, to turn toward the problems of the world, to listen, to create solutions. God is eager to use your love to transform the world into the likeness of heaven.

Dr. King’s third group is the neighbor. The good neighbor in contrast to the robber knows that “What is mine is yours.” They understand that all humanity is linked and tied together. Neither robbing predators nor indifferent passersby can be safe in a world where misery, famine, plague and hatred are the scourge of millions. The question of the indifferent passerby (what will happen to me if I help?) becomes for the neighbor, “what will happen to the wounded stranger if I don’t help?”

Dr. King said, “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed, so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

We are to love as individuals. We are to love as a church. We are to love as a community, state, and country. Our individual love united with the love of others will create a loving world. As long as there are people without the basic necessities of life each of us is sinning, as long as someone is hurting without help, each of us is failing to love enough. We are commanded to love extravagantly ushering in a world where every person experiences love, dignity, and a joyful life.

In seminary, I volunteered at a homeless shelter. I got to know Steve, a wonderful person. He lost his parents at a young age. He had no support system, no family, no friends to help him. Through no fault of his own, he became homeless. His desire was to get a job and provide for himself. He worked hard to become literate. If you do not have a diploma, address, phone number, and email address, it is extremely difficult to get a job. Steve's persistent determination was rewarded with a job. The shelter provided him with clothes. Public transit provided him transportation. The dilemma was the hours of the employment were in the evening, so he could not get back to the shelter in time to eat, sleep, and shower. His first pay check was two weeks away. He decided to sleep in a box by his work. After a few days without food, good sleep, and most of all a shower he was fired, not due to his quality of work rather his hygiene. As a society, we are failing to love Steve. I was loving Steve by tutoring him. The shelter and government were also loving him. His employer loved him by giving him a job. Yet, love in the transition from shelter to independence was hampered by rules of when one could enter the shelter. There was one desperately needed piece of love missing, so all of us failed to truly love Steve. Individual love is often not enough. We need to love together, to understand the needs of others, to find real and lasting solutions. We need to love together. If we asked every resident in the Twin Cities if this church is a good neighbor to them. How would they respond?

We are in the midst of a debate regarding the "others" in our country and the "others" in the world. I wish the debate was over how to love the "others". That in itself is a complex problem with a myriad of approaches. What saddens me is there is a growing group of people who feel we have no obligation to love the "others". What truly makes a great country? Is a great country, a country that has compassion for the poor, weak, sick and oppressed and is loving them, as the country creates solutions, creates an environment where all can enjoy life? A great country is not elite. A great country does not try to go back in time, because there never was a time when a country was ever even good, for there never has been a time without prejudice, isms, and oppression. A great country will be a loving neighbor to all the "other" countries and to each individual in the world. Jesus is urging us to not give up, to not become indifferent, to never stop having compassion, to never stop loving.

We have the ultimate Good Samaritan, Jesus, loving us. God is with us on the roadside. God is with us wherever we are, whenever we are on the outside looking in, whenever we are rejected or alone, or sick, or exhausted. God is with us when our lives seem to be slipping through our fingers, when life is draining, when we feel alone desperately crying, "How can I joyfully live?". Jesus picks us up, binds our wounds and brings us home to our true self, our best self to live abundantly, enabling us to generously, gratefully love God and everyone. We love, because God loves us. We have compassion, care, and can transform the world, because God has compassion for us. God cares for us. God transforms us. Love God. Love everyone. Amen