

“Urgent Resolute Love”

Mark 1:15, Luke 9:51-62 & 10:25-37, Psalm 118:24

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Prayer for Understanding Holy God, Your invitation is simple. You lean in close. You say our name. With joy in your voice, you invite us to follow. But the noise of this world is distracting and we are afraid, so we get stuck somewhere between our head and our heart. We get stuck somewhere between our intent and our action. Speak to us again. Tell us the story. Invite us to follow. Speak again of good news that will not leave us. Amen.

This lent be resolute in making 1 to 3 changes that will expand love and goodness. The theme of Jesus teaching is **Mark 1:15 “Repent and believe in the good news.”** Repent is to change to always loving, to change from fear to peace, to change from judgment to grace, to change from hate to love, to change from binary thinking to spectrum thinking, to change from ranked thinking to paradoxical thinking, to change from division to unity, to change from oppression to community for all, to change to always loving, to change to always loving, to change to always loving.

Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem where Jesus would change the cosmos, change every form of death to everlasting life, change every void of love to pure love. The gospel of Luke proclaims: **Luke 9:51-62 “As the time drew near for Jesus to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Jesus sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But the people of the village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, “Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. So they went on to another village. As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” Jesus said to another person, “Come, follow me.” The man agreed, but he said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” But Jesus told him, “Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God.” Another said, “Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.” But Jesus told him, “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”**

Jesus is urging more than good intentions, a change to loving action, more than I will do it later to a change to loving now. Jesus is approached by people who want to follow him. Jesus’ responses are urgent. Jesus is looking for urgent, resolute commitment. Jesus challenges every excuse urging a change to love now. This lent ask yourself: Am I ready? Am I willing to change? How will I expand love? How will I move beyond good intentions to action today, this lent, this year and for the rest of my earthly life? Are you ready to listen for good news in seemingly impossible spaces, even as a divided people? Are you ready to set Lenten intentions, even with this year’s challenges? Are you ready to start now despite good reasons to wait a little longer? Are you ready to move toward change? Before the sun sets today will you write down a change you will make, do the first step of that change and post that change where you will see it every day so you will make that change? Move beyond an easy, safe and comfortable place of, “yes other people should do something,” “yes, I will do something some day” to a Lenten journey of action, a resolute, urgent quest to loving extravagantly.

Jesus’ responses to the excuses suggest that one will never be completely ready so whoever your being, whatever your circumstances, love now. I have spent most of my life with a sinful rationalization. I will be joyful when... I will be joyful when I graduate, when I lose weight, when I pay off debt, when I have the sermon written, when I have the laundry done, when I have the house clean, when I do more grieving. Psalmist commands: **Psalm 118:24 “This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.”** We are to be joyful now, joyful in every moment, joyful with all the ick, ugliness, and pain of life.

One can rejoice and be glad even in the midst of awful moments. One can be actively changing to expand love and be grieving. Jesus wept. Jesus grieved. And Jesus was resolute in changing the cosmos with good news. And when we fail to make loving changes, God’s grace forgives us and gives us infinite opportunities. And when we fail by putting off good actions resting in good intentions, God’s grace forgives us and gives us energy to change. And when we fail in loving completely because our perception is distorted, our plan is incomplete and our actions a mere snippet of loving progress. God’s grace forgives us, helps us learn, gives us wisdom to adjust our action and gives us infinite opportunities to change.

Jesus is challenging humanities apathy. Humans have been putting off a change to love for hundreds of thousands of years, for multi-thousands of generations. Grieve and do something to expand love. Build a home and do something to expand love. Honor your family commitments and do something to expand love. Jesus taught with spectrum, paradoxical thinking, the mystery of “both and,” the tension of polar opposites, with truth being in each extreme and everything in between. Richard Rohr writes: “One reason we have failed to understand so much of Jesus’ teaching, much less follow it, is because we tried to understand with dualistic minds.” We can grieve and change and make a choice to expand love. Each of us is created in the image of God. Each of us is capable of infinitely more than we can imagine. Each of us is capable of cosmos redeeming love. And we can do this love while doing all the tasks of daily life. We are capable of learning on the go. This is the moment. Ready or not make a loving change in every moment. Before the sun sets today, what loving change will you decide to make and what first action will you take to make that love a reality?

Some people did not welcome Jesus. The disciples demanded judgment asking for a burning fire to burn up the people who rejected Jesus. Jesus rebuked judgment and rebuked punishment. God loves everyone. God loves those who reject God. We are called to love everyone, to love those who we adamantly disagree with, to love people from all religions, to love people who reject God. We are called to love everyone. Perhaps your loving change is to start loving the people you have resisted loving, to love people as they are, to love people as they believe without trying to change them, to love people without any conditions, to love people without any “ifs”. To love perfectly, we must mirror God’s unconditional love for all. When we love others unconditionally, we discover how to love ourselves unconditionally which are multifaceted changes to love. Barbra Brown Taylor puts it this way: “The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self, to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.”

Be resolute in love. Let go of your excuses. Let come loving action.

A lawyer was looking for a loophole, an exception, to not love someone, a justification that allows one to not love someone who continues heinous actions. The gospel of Luke explains: **Luke 10:25-37 “One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?” The man answered, ““You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!” The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. “By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when they saw the man, they felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then they put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where they took care of him. The next day they handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I will pay you the next time I am here.’ “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked. The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.” Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.””**

Jesus’ love for everyone got him crucified. Jesus’ radical love that welcomed every outcast, love that gave each person freedom to be themselves, love that pardoned every criminal, love that healed people from other religions, loved that welcomed people with no belief in God, love that tore down every wall, love that flipped over every table that sought to control another, made many people angry. Instead of changing themselves to mirror God’s unconditional love for everyone, they supported systems that denied love and supported laws that justify their unloving ways.

The lawyer is well read, financially comfortable, meditates regularly on scripture and faithfully worships God. This person was tired of the raging political debates and power struggles between the Romans, religion and the working class. They were frustrated by the labels, beliefs and assumptions that were driving people apart. They were unsure what to do amid this mess. Imagine the lawyer’s motivations, objectives and fears. How do you identify with them?

The Samaritan, whose place of worship and customs are different from the lawyer, is both a stranger and a neighbor to the person who was beaten and left in a ditch. This is a parable of two people on the opposite ends of the spectrum politically, religiously, and financially. The Samaritan’s loving action that bridged every divide was

extremely shocking. The parable commands that each of us be a neighbor to every stranger, that no one is ever excluded for any reason, that none of us ever withhold love for anyone. This parable upended the lawyers' expectations, upended their understanding of scripture, upended what their religion was teaching and upended their entire framework. Imagine the lawyer's reaction.

Richard Rohr writes: "What would it mean to build a society in which every person is treated as an image of the Divine? How would this affect our relationships with our neighbors, our coworkers, the stranger lying beneath the stained blankets and trash outside Starbucks? Wouldn't it compel us to recast the cultures of our schools, organizations, and faith communities? How would it impact health care, education, public policy?... How would it transform law enforcement and criminal justice systems—where today judgment is too often rendered based on whether a person is Black or white, rich or poor, rather than guilty or innocent?"

In his last speech before being assassinated, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about the story of the Good Samaritan. Martin visited the Jericho Road in 1959. Martin saw its twists and felt its turns as it wound through the hills and sank into a valley outside Jerusalem. There were so many potential hiding places for robbers to lie in wait, ready to ambush weary travelers. "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me" about the priest and temple assistant, Martin said. "It's possible they were afraid." Perhaps they fearfully asked themselves, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" The Good Samaritan, Martin said, "reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this person, what will happen to them?'" Then Martin urged his listeners to imagine themselves on contemporary Jericho Roads. Could they—would they—ask that same question when they saw others struggling? Who is struggling today? Who is being attacked by politics, religion, and those in power? Jesus commands you stand up for them and help them. Who is being treated as if the image of God is not in them? Who is being forced to deny the way God created them, to conform to how the powerful prefer to live, merely so the majority feels a little more comfortable? Jesus commands that you help them be true to their self, stop oppressive laws and end narrow minded religion.

Martin said, "I want to pave the Jericho Road, add streetlights, make the Jericho Road safe for everybody." Supposedly we live in the land of the free. Horrifically, in this current season every day there are actions taken that are taking away freedom. God commands us to love everyone, to create laws, systems, structures, politics, and religion that welcomes everyone as a beloved member of the worldwide family of God. The command to love is urgent and we are to be resolute.

Jesus revealed to the lawyer, who thought they were a good person by their worship, that there is to be no strangers; loving action is commanded for everyone. Jesus challenged the lawyer to not feel safe in human made religion that excludes, oppresses and justifies, for eternal life involves love for everyone. Despite the self-justifying apathy of the lawyer Jesus is gracious and teaches to love is to truly live.

"Never Met a Stranger"

a poem by Sarah Speed

When we talk about God, we say she's never met a stranger.

She makes friends at the airport.

She waves to babies in the check-out line.

When we talk about God, we say she'll leave the porch light on.

She'll have warm bread in the oven.

She'll have all the time in the world.

When we talk about God, we say she'll look you in the eye.

She'll love you as you are.

She'll call you by your name.

When we talk about God, we never have to talk about which side of the road she might walk down.

Wherever you are, that's where God will be.

Stop making excuses. It is urgent that you take loving action now. Stop justifying behavior that harms another to calm your fear. Stop rationalizing the behavior of any person who is unloving to anyone. Stop being silent when anyone spreads lies, fuels fear, dehumanizes and advocates hate, find your loving voice, let the Holy Spirit through the parable of the Samaritan move you to loving action today. Amen