

This We Believe: Love
Luke 10.25-37
Pentecost +15
September 6, 2015
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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When it comes to love, I could have picked any number of texts as we delve into our third corporate commitment of loving neighbors.

I John 4.7-8 "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

John 13.34-35 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I Corinthians 13.1-13 "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,

even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

It’s the parable of the good Samaritan that always grabs me. Having grown up in the church, I have heard it told in every way possible. Today I return to this story because it starts with a fair question, shifts to a good question and ends with a great question. Two weeks ago we talked about this way of refining questions as part of our identity here. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” becomes “Who is my neighbor?” and then takes one more turn.

The man comes to Jesus with a question about his own self-preservation. “Jesus, I’m doing everything right, but something is missing. I need you to tell me I’m doing enough. I need you to tell me I’m good enough. I need you to tell me my points add up and that I have the right understanding of who God is. I need to know that I have a place in God’s kingdom forever.”

It’s a fair question. It’s a question many of us have asked at some point in our lives. Which path is the right path? Am I on the right path? Do I believe the right things? Fair questions.

Jesus points the man toward scripture, and the two consider passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus: Love God with all of who you are and love your neighbor as yourself. How do I inherit eternal life? Jesus points him toward primary statements of faith as if to say, “You know this. What do you already profess? What do you already claim to believe?”

Then a fair question becomes a good question: Who is my neighbor?

Now the man begins to understand that his question isn’t simply about inheriting eternal life. He is a devout person of faith. He regularly attends worship and studies scripture in his community. He checks all of the boxes on his weekly offering envelope. He goes through all the motions he has been told are the right motions. And yet something is lacking. Something doesn’t feel like enough. Something doesn’t feel like it has clicked in a way that confirms life that is real life, life that is abundant life, life that is eternal life has begun. So maybe he’s *doing* faith wrong.

Or maybe his *thinking* is wrong. Or maybe he hasn't entered worship in the right spirit.

Jesus begins to ask questions that gently turn this man's attention from himself to someone else. A question of what do I do for myself becomes who am I called to love.

And as Jesus does best, he tells a story.

There was a man left for dead and in great need. And the people passed by without real concern. We know from the first word that we are in this story, too. And we're right to suspect that we aren't the hero.

There was a pregnant, homeless woman begging for money on Carrollton Avenue in front of Costco, and the people checked their iPhones at the red light in hopes of not making eye contact with her. *Homeless and pregnant. Somebody should do something about this. I don't want to see this every day.* The light changes, the people drive on.

There was a Syrian family fleeing for their lives, and their boats capsized. The sea was too strong, and the mother and two of her children were pulled beneath the waves. Images covered newspapers and Facebook feeds, and the people hid the images in favor of an article about a new gallery opening or a video of a labrador and a parakeet playing together. *I don't want to see that first thing in the morning. That picture makes me feel sad. Somebody should do something about this.*

The priest passed by on the other side. The Levite passed by on the other side. But the Samaritan came to the man, saw him, took pity on him, went to him, bandaged him, carried him, provided for him, took care of him until he was well.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" became "Who is my neighbor?" Then, after Jesus finished the story, he asked the great question, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Jesus is describing a different way of engaging the world. Instead of checking a list to make sure I have secured what is mine, instead of fearful self-preservation, Jesus invites

the expert in the law, the student of scripture, the seeker, the 21st-century listener to ask a better question: "Am I a good neighbor?"

You want to inherit eternal life? Eternal life has already started. What are you noticing in the world around you? As you walk on your way to whatever next thing demands your time, what do you see along the way? When a need arises, do you respond? Are you filled with compassion? Do you reprioritize your schedule and your fear and your sense of propriety and enter into the needs of another? Who is the neighbor in this story?

Loving neighbors is easy until we begin living it out. Jesus starts with a big, obvious, and personal example of the ways we fail at being neighbors. Most of us, for any number of shameful and decent reasons, pass by on the other side. Perhaps it is helpful to start smaller and think in concentric circles about our most intimate relationships, then the larger communities of faith community, civic organizations, physical neighborhoods, city at large, nation, world. What kind of neighbors are we? How do we love?

Loving starts in the mundane; practicing kindness, patience, gentleness; loving the people around us in ways that carry us beyond ourselves. Henri Nouwen famously wrote of church as "a school of love" because our eternal path is one of practice and not immediate perfection. We are learning to be neighbors. We are learning that the very act of loving points back to God's nature. We are learning that Love and the Divine are so intimately connected that they are one. We are learning that when we are swept up into the Way of Love, we are swept up into the Way of God.

Next week, our final in this series, we consider what it means to welcome all. Loving neighbors and welcoming all sound pretty similar. Loving and Welcoming, what's the difference? The relationship between loving and welcoming is a lot like the relationship between asking questions and seeking justice. One is a process of understanding and being that informs a way of seeking and acting in the world. The ways of seeking justice raise more questions, then the questions inspire more justice seeking.

Imagine a circular loop of arrows flowing in two directions to and from this room. The love arrows are the ones we are sending out into the world. How are we going

out into this world as neighbors? How do we carry the Way of Love into our ordinary lives? The welcome arrows are the ones coming into this space. How do we welcome people into this school of love?

Like the scholar who came to Jesus, we are learning that the stuff of our faith is not limited to the hour or two or three that we spend in this beautiful facility together. Loving and welcoming aren't limited to our physical presence at St. Charles and Broadway, but we start the conversation and the practice here and then carry it out into our lives and homes and traffic jams and weekly chores. We carry our practice out and then come back here and practice more. We call each other to be people who notice, who really see the world around us, who step into difficult conversations and hard situations, who sit alongside friends and strangers in their fear and grief, who bandage wounds, lift up, provide for, and take care.

We fail. A lot. We disappoint. Often. We try again. Every time. Loving our neighbors takes practice.

In just a moment, I will invite you all to join me at the table of remembrance as we break bread together. With that meal in mind, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, [Jesus] did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do—specific ways of being together in their bodies—that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself... 'Do this', he said—not *believe* this but *do* this—in remembrance of me."¹

At St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, we aspire to honor God by loving each other well. We commit ourselves to this school of love. We discover here that the Way of Love is the Way of God. And at this table we give ourselves to this Way of loving God and loving neighbors through our very bodies and our daily lives.

This we believe.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 45