

The Greatest of These

Text: Luke 10:25-37, 1 Corinthians 13

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 13, 2020

I think it's fitting that this pandemic began here in the U.S. during Lent. Because if there ever was a modern analogy to the Israelites wandering in the desert wilderness, this is it. As they struggled to find a direction, the Bible tells us that God led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And it's not a stretch to say that we could use something that obvious as well.

In difficult times, when grief is thick and the road is hard, we need something simple. We don't have the energy for intellectual debates or fine distinctions. We need a cloud shaped like a giant arrow or a bright fiery pillar—something really obvious that just says, "Go this way."

The good news is that I think the Bible has exactly that. Of course the Bible has plenty of things for people to argue about and get confused or angry over; but when it comes to the most important issues, it also has passages that put all the confusion to one side and say to us, "I know it seems complicated, but what it boils down to is this." And of all those places, there are two that stand out for me. The first is the passage you've probably heard at many weddings and almost as many funerals. It's the love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13—the passage that explains the characteristics of love and points out in its final verse that love is not only greater than hope; it is even greater than faith. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

There's very little that needs interpretation or explaining in that chapter. When Paul says if you don't have love, you're like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, we all have people that come to mind. Those who talk the talk but don't walk the walk are not just ineffective; they're painfully obnoxious. They turn people away from faith and make people cover their ears. "Noisy gong or clanging cymbal fits the bill." It doesn't matter if they donate huge sums of money, can recite the Bible from memory, or even have faith that can remove mountains. I mean really—who have you met that can remove mountains with their faith? On many a drive stuck in traffic I've tried to use my faith to remove Boston, and I can't even budge the gas tank. There are people who can remove mountains by faith? But even if you manage it, says Paul, it's worthless if you don't have love.

And the way love is described here isn't some mystical experience that we can't identify with. That, too, is plain. "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." Moreover, it's eternal. "Love never ends." That sentence is engraved on the granite bench that serves as the marker for my family burial plot. I picked the verse. This won't be the last time you hear about it.

There's a lot of Paul that's a tough slog to read. That was true even at the time. We know that because in the Bible Peter confirms that Paul is hard to understand at the end of his second letter. But this chapter is crystal clear. If you're not starting from a place of love as evidenced in the attitudes Paul describes—patient, kind, and all the rest—then not even faith matters. Love is the first priority—the top of the pyramid—or, as John tells us in his first letter, it is the very nature of God. God IS love.

We are made in God's image. Spiritual growth is not centered on increasing our faith, believing more intellectual doctrines, or gaining more knowledge about the Bible and church. Noisy gongs can have all that and remain spiritual infants. Spiritual growth—which takes a lifetime—is about polishing the image of God within ourselves so that God's love is mirrored back with ever-increasing clarity to everyone who looks at our lives. Spiritual growth is about growing in love. Want a concrete example of what that looks like? Come with me to the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke and let's visit with Jesus and a lawyer who wants to know what he has to do to inherit eternal life.

It's a pretty big question, and if you'd asked me that when I was in my late teens and early twenties, I would have whipped out a tract with the Four Spiritual Laws. Those are what the evangelical brand of Christianity sees as the core building blocks of faith and are built around passages from Paul's writings and the Gospel of John. Their answer to the lawyer's question is that to be saved you need to have faith in Jesus. So, it seems important to see how Jesus himself answers. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the man asks. How does Jesus respond? Drum roll, please.

Knowing that the man is well-versed in the Law of Moses, Jesus does what he frequently does when answering questions from the Pharisees. He turns the question back on him: "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The man answers, "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." You might recognize that as what Christians have come to call the Great Commandment, but Jesus didn't make that up. The lawyer is not quoting Jesus when he gives that answer; he is quoting two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, the part about loving God with all you've got is from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the "love your neighbor as yourself" part is from Leviticus 19:18. The great rabbis of the age had already determined that those things together summed up the Law of Moses and both Jesus and this lawyer knew it.

Jesus then confirms it by saying, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." No four spiritual laws there. No confessing that you're a sinner or professing faith. It turns out that we inherit eternal life not by what we believe in our heads or what we say with our lips, but by the way we show forth the love of God in our lives. Which is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13. Faith isn't **un**important, don't misunderstand me, but it's not the most important thing. The greatest of these is love. You can get the faith part wrong and still march right on through the pearly gates. There is no theology quiz. You don't have to present your Sunday School pins or baptismal ID. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself and eternal life is yours. Jesus says so in plain and simple language. Miss love, and Paul says the rest is only so much noise.

But the lawyer in Luke isn't done, even though he was able to answer his own question. And it's in his follow-up question that we see that he's really looking for a loophole in the law. "Who is my neighbor?" he asks. It seems "Love your neighbor as yourself" is too broad for him. Surely there's some further definition. Who is my neighbor, exactly? Neighbor can't really mean everybody, can it?

If we're honest, we all have that question at one time or another. When I lived in Plymouth, I had a literal neighbor a few houses down who my Facebook friends came to know as my "Neighbor from Hell." I even wrote lyrics to a song about him. The chorus went: "He's my neighbor from hell, so let's be realistic. I'm all for "love your neighbor," but do we have to be specific? I'll give money to the starving; I'll support the ne'er do well; but Lord, please don't make me love my neighbor from hell." So, I get it. At one time or another we're all that lawyer, standing in front of Jesus, imagining a very specific person or group of people and asking, "Can I get out of this? Can we narrow the definition of neighbor in a way that doesn't require me to include *them*?" And so we ask with the lawyer, "And who is my neighbor?" On this we'd like the Bible to be a bit more complicated and demanding.

But Jesus is having none of that. That big-arrow cloud of Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and that fiery pillar of Love your neighbor as yourself isn't a legal concept to be parsed. It's a guide for how to get to the promised land of eternal life, a life with God, a life that mirrors the loving image of God in brilliant clarity. And on the off chance that the man really doesn't understand, Jesus tells a story.

We've come to know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan and it's famous enough that charitable organizations from hospitals to suicide hotlines bear the name "Samaritan." But what is often lost in translation is that making a Samaritan the hero of the story would not have been even slightly popular to the Jews of Jesus' day. To say the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day didn't get along is a gross understatement. To get the impact on the lawyer, think of the story being told today at either the Democratic or Republican National Convention with the hero being from the other party.

But however much the story must have stung when the lawyer heard it, there was no debating the point. And to drive it home, Jesus flips the tables and again turns the question back on the lawyer. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The man responds with the obvious: "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then finishes up with the instruction, "Go and do likewise."

In saying that, Jesus also shifted the focus of the question. The lawyer wanted to know who he was allowed to exclude under the "love your neighbor" command--who was a neighbor and who wasn't. But Jesus reframed the question. By the end, it was no longer about the man's ability to identify who was a neighbor to him; it was now about his own willingness to be a neighbor to others. "Never mind them," Jesus is saying. "Your job is to make sure that **you** are the one who shows mercy; that **you** are the one who stops when someone, anyone, is hurting and that you care for them as you would for yourself. Never mind the noisy gongs out there. To inherit eternal life, **you** are the one who needs to love, without condition or exception."

The lawyer has no further questions. Because it's obvious. The cloud is the cloud and the pillar is the pillar and you just follow it; and if it leads to a person in a ditch, you don't stop and ask whether the person deserves your help or is part of a group you approve of or whether the word "neighbor" really applies to this one. You help, because that's what loving God in this world looks like. "Do this," says Jesus, "and you will live."

It's as plain as the judgment scene in Matthew 25, which is the only place in the Bible that Jesus describes how we will be judged: "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and in prison and you visited me." It's all the same message—the cloud and pillar that you can see no matter how dusty and difficult the road. Focus. Look around. Who do you see? What are their needs? Whether you like them or not, whether you think they deserve their plight or not doesn't matter. Care for them as you would care for yourself, even if everyone else crosses the road to leave them in the ditch. That's what fulfilling the Great Commandment looks like. How do we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength? By loving our neighbors as ourselves.

That simple command is how we inherit eternal life as individuals, and is what we can do when the enormity of grief and anxiety around us seems too difficult to bear. The advice Mr. Rogers gave to children in such times was to look for the helpers. The advice Jesus gives is to BE the helper. To do the kind thing, the patient thing, the thing that is not boastful or arrogant or rude.

Faith and hope are important things, but they are the fruit that comes from a life of love. Faith doesn't produce love; it's the other way around. God's love comes to us free for the taking as we are, no matter who we are or how badly we've messed up. But that love isn't for us to hoard. As those made in God's image, we reflect God's love back to the world in acts of loving service. In doing so—in loving God through loving our neighbors as ourselves—we get everything, including faith, hope, and eternal life.

If you want your spiritual life to grow, start practicing love. Start small, like we did last week by blessing the ground. Start with easy stuff—puppies, butterflies, anything. Loving our enemies is a tall order. Most of us still haven't mastered really loving our family and friends. We won't do it overnight. The spirit of love grows within us like a tree over a lifetime. As we practice and tend it, we'll discover the faith, hope and all the other virtues everyone talks about growing right there in its branches. The greatest of these is love. The Creator's nature is love. Everything that ever was or will be comes from that. Amen.