

We Have One Job

TEXT: 1 John 4:16b-21

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 14, 2026

I've preached a fair number of "last sermons" at this point. But as I've been packing up my life—both physically and emotionally—to move into retirement, I've been looking back at all the churches I've served, the unique challenges each one presented, and the way that those congregations and I shaped each other during my time there.

There have been many amazing worship services across the years. But when I thought about what I wanted to say this morning, and our theme for this year about figuring out what we each believe, one service stands out from all the rest. Not because of the preaching or the music or some other presentation from the chancel. This service stood out because it was the congregation itself who preached the message after a hard week of wrestling with what they believed.

You'll see a bit of it in the video being shown in Gifford Hall after the service, but I want to give the bigger context and explain why it mattered and why that service is relevant, not just to Crawford, but to every single church of every stripe in every nation on earth here in the Year of our Lord 2026.

It was Sunday, November 2, 2003, and I was serving St. John's UMC in Dover, New Hampshire. That was All Saints Sunday, but that focus went out the window just over a week before, when the church got a call from the Dover police department. The police wanted us to know that they had just granted a permit for a group to protest our church.

It was Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church, the hate-filled anti-LGBTQ extended family, who live in a walled compound in Topeka, Kansas. They're also antisemitic, anti-Muslim, and basically anti anyone who isn't them; but the gay community is their chief target; and their profane signs, over-the-top chants, and determination to disrupt, demean, and call down hellfire on individuals and groups across the country always got them headlines.

By the fall of 2003, they were even protesting at the funerals of soldiers killed in the Iraq war, claiming that God killed them because of the policy of allowing LGBTQ people to serve in the military. The funeral disruptions made them so universally despised that Hell's Angels began attending those funerals to protect the mourners and the dignity of services from Phelps and his family.

In this day and age, small groups like that are able to gain a national and even international platform through social media and dark money. But in 2003, Westboro funded its nationwide campaign through lawsuits. Phelps and several of his family members were lawyers. They knew that they would win a freedom of speech lawsuit, no matter how offensive their signs and shouts were; and they knew exactly where the line was to avoid any kind of charges.

But their tactic was to get as close to people as possible, to make their signs and speech so egregiously over the top and hateful, and get in people's faces with it, until someone couldn't take it anymore and pushed one of them away or—even better for them—hailed off and hit one of them. A lawsuit would be on the organization's desk before Westboro even left town. They won those cases and the money awarded from the lawsuit funded their trip to the next place.

They weren't coming halfway across the country just for me and St. John's, although I was on his radar. But that afternoon, in the next town over, the first openly gay priest in any denomination, Gene Robinson, was being consecrated as a bishop in the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire; and that high-profile event made it worth the trip. In the morning they decided to get the hate pumping by planning protests at several churches in the area, including St. John's.

The call from the police came about 10 days prior to the planned protest, which gave us one Sunday in-between to tell people about it. The call came a Friday or Saturday, giving me 24-48 hours to figure out a strategy for Nov. 2 and get the congregation informed.

The first piece was pretty easy. St. John's had two services on Sunday mornings, and the protest was scheduled during the half hour that people from the first service would be leaving and those from the second service would be arriving, giving the protestors maximum access and visibility to both groups. Those coming in or out would have to drive right past, and even between them at the end of the driveway.

So, the first thing we did was change to only one service that week and put the protest time in the middle, making sure everyone would be inside the sanctuary during the entire half-hour protest time. You couldn't see the road from the sanctuary, except from the narthex, where we had ushers watching to make sure they didn't come down on the property. By law they could only be in public space.

But that didn't solve the larger problem of people being scared. We had a lot of families who didn't want their kids to see the profanity-laced signs. They were afraid there might be violence. While I don't want to repeat the offensive language of the names they used, the most famous Westboro signs all began with the words "God hates."

So that last Sunday in October I told the congregation what was coming up, reminding them that "God is love" is not just an idea, it's a Bible verse. 1 John 4:8b. I reminded them, as I had right after 9/11, that "God is love" is the one non-negotiable in my theology and that the next week, Nov. 2, would not be "All Saints Sunday," but "Here I Stand" Sunday, because Westboro's hate, vitriol, and abuse was an attack on that core.

The day before, we had printed hundreds of 8.5 x 11 signs, just on regular paper, that said exactly that, "God Is Love," and put them in the narthex. Sunday morning, I told them I understood if it felt too risky to come the next week, or if they had concerns about their children or whatever.

BUT, if they did choose to come, I invited them to take as many of the "God Is Love" signs as they wanted. And, if Westboro found out that we had changed the time or for some other reason they encountered the group, their children should hold up the sign against the car window, with the message facing out, so that Westboro could see our message and the kids could not see theirs. Our entire pile of signs were taken as people left that morning.

We then changed the church sign out by the road, which was the spot where they would be protesting. We covered that with a big "God Is Love" sign as well, and I made sure we put the Bible citation underneath to remind Westboro, who claimed to take the Bible literally, that we had Scripture to back it up. And since the sign was private property, they couldn't tear it down.

And then we waited. I had no idea who would come or what would happen. I didn't know if everyone would get the message about the changed service time. But I also knew that for a solidly middle-class, mostly white town, who rarely had to imagine danger of any sort coming to them, let alone during church; just the exercise of spending a week trying to decide whether it was safe to go to church the next Sunday was spiritually critical.

This was not a hypothetical—"What would you do if...?" It was, "They're coming. What will you do?" What they actually decided to do was secondary to having to wrestle with and answer that question for themselves. There was no "maybe" option. They would decide to come or not.

Finally, it was Sunday. The usual time came for the first service and the parking lot was empty. And then cars began to drive in. They had their "God Is Love" signs—not just the ones we had printed but ones they made themselves. One had made a "God is Love" banner that spanned the entire length of their van. Another came in and told me that they had left home early, with their children, to go find the place where Westboro was scheduled to protest before us so that they could drive by and hold up their "God Is Love" signs in the windows.

The sanctuary was filled to capacity, adults and children alike. The energy in the room felt like it could have lifted the pews off the floor. By the end of the opening hymn, it could no longer be contained, and a spontaneous

cheer went up around the sanctuary. Hands clapped and arms waved, for the joy of standing up together for the one thing that mattered most.

The ushers were watching the road. When Westboro found out we had outwitted them, they did begin to come down the drive into our property, but the Dover police were right behind them to usher them back to the public road. And we had worship like never before.

In my 32 years of ministry, that was the only Sunday where every single person in the sanctuary knew exactly why they had come and what they stood for. That morning, it wasn't just habit or duty or responsibilities in worship or Sunday school that brought them to church. It wasn't even the fellowship and community.

When hate came knocking on the door, Love rose up like a mama grizzly defending her cubs and ran to meet it. "God is love" is not a slogan; it is the force that created the world; and that morning it created the church. It wasn't All Saints. It was Pentecost.

Although it is now, at the time, St. John's was not a Reconciling Congregation. There was no Pride flag on our sign; and members of the congregation were all over the place on that issue. But everyone came that morning anyway. They knew the red line of their faith; and when Westboro threatened to cross it, they knew they had just one job. Love: Always and everywhere and everyone. When love met their fear, it turned into unshakable courage.

The Right Reverend Gene Robinson had to wear a bullet-proof vest to his consecration that afternoon. But the vest was not tested, and he took his place with every other bishop before him. He, too, along with all the others in that assembly—many others also wearing Kevlar, knew they had just one job. They met their fears with love and it became courage.

It's been 23 years since "Here I Stand Sunday" at St. John's. While Fred Phelps has since died, his daughter escaped the compound and did an exposé, and Westboro isn't as much in the news as it was then; the hate is now spread wider and deeper and no longer needs lawsuits for funding, although that's always a nice bit of gravy on top of the dark money millions. Worse, love itself is deemed irrelevant and even sinful in its more tender and inclusive forms.

Our bishop gave me a retirement appointment back in April, but when I was taken there by the District Superintendent to be introduced as their new pastor, and said that the foundation of my theology was "God is love," I was told that pastors should preach about sin, that my sermons would be mushy and awful, and then they refused the appointment. The DS sadly told me that there was no other church to offer me anywhere near where I'll be living.

I got the appointment to Richmond, when it came open at the last minute; and I'm looking forward to being with their congregation. The other church, the church that doesn't want to hear "God is love," won't be hearing much of anything as they didn't have anyone appointed to serve them as of Annual Conference.

But they're not alone in turning away from love, even in the church. You can buy a book called *Leadership and the Sin of Empathy*; and another called *Toxic Empathy*. Apparently suckers like the Samaritan, who stop to take care of people left for dead in ditches, are taking resources away from those who are smarter, stronger, and who live better lives so that they don't end up getting beaten by robbers.

There's a need now for Christians to take their stand. To link arms with those who we may argue with on all kinds of issues, but who understand 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who doesn't love, doesn't know God for God IS love."

Quoting that passage to the leadership of a United Methodist Church to describe my theology was so offensive to them that they wouldn't accept me as their pastor. But I have one job—the same job that I felt God calling me to do when standing in the pulpit of the North Scituate Baptist Church in Rhode Island at age 14. "Anne, for the rest of your life, stand in pulpits and tell people that I love them." Here I stand. Amen.