

## Love Your Neighbor

How many of you read the Wednesday email this past week? How many of you were here last Sunday? Just getting a feel for where to begin.

Last Sunday we began the trilogy of love commandments Jesus said were the highest commandments and really are the essence of his entire teaching. We're using the scripture base found in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark: *One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Last week we talked about using the language of "Align with the Divine" for "Love God". We are aiming for an intimate and personal relationship with divine energy everywhere present and in us, through us, as us. We noticed how this love alignment is not limited to the absolute, spiritual realm, although that might be a lot simpler. "Align just your **mind** with absolute love" could avoid how messy love gets when it is muddled in our humanity. We might be able to stay tidy in our heads loving the pure essence of love. We can blame Jesus for the mandate to embrace and embody both our divinity and our humanity as he commands to love "with all your heart and with all your strength". Holding this duality in oneness seems to be our work on earth. We talked last week about the reference to "the Lord is one" as being "one with us" and God being one with us in the midst of our humanity, in the midst of our work to embody oneness. So Jesus is really just saying, "Do what you came here to do." As we **align** all of who we are, we open to the flow of spiritual energy *into all of who we are*—body, mind, relationships, finance, creative work and all of it! THAT seems like kind of a good deal.

For me, I don't mind working on aligning with the divine in the abstract. I don't have a problem seeing the divine in the trees and flowers and critters and birds. I can be one with a peaceful, pleasant evening, a starlit night, a sunny day at the beach.

I begin to get tested seeing the divine in the wasps that gather along the sidewalk outside my apartment but I try to give them space and hope they return the favor. Where the rubber really meets the road is the second part of the trilogy, “Love your neighbor”. If you think it is difficult when I say, “church is your laboratory to experiment on *being love*,” expanding the laboratory to include the whole world is overwhelming! So who, exactly **is** our neighbor? The gospel of Mark doesn’t expound much on that technicality and although Matthew has three separate references to loving your neighbor, he doesn’t illuminate the idea of neighbor the way Luke does.

We find the commandments used in Luke as a response to a lawyer’s question on how to have eternal life. Continuing to test Jesus after his response the lawyer asked, “Who then is my neighbor”. The response to that is the story of the Good Samaritan. The title “Good Samaritan” has taken on a colloquial meaning of a helpful stranger. In the time of the story telling, however, the Hebrew audience was probably shocked to have a Samaritan in a positive role. Even a gentile audience would be surprised to have a Samaritan do what a priest or Levite would not. Samaritans were looked down upon and there was great animosity generally between the Samaritans and Israelites. Yet it was the Samaritan who tended to the beaten man and spent his own money to have him cared for.

How might we recast the characters in a modern telling of this Good Samaritan tale? Suppose an old VW bus with a bunch of peace symbols and “make love not war” stickers is broken down beside the road and a man is collapsed beside it. Who might be the **least** likely to stop and help? We might have lots of possibilities for the roles who would drive by. The busy executive in the Mercedes or Jaguar. The evangelist hurrying off to a fundraising rally. Maybe even a car full of old hippies on the way to a protest with barely enough gas money to get to where they are going. And so who **will** we have stop and help? Maybe the guy with the confederate flag and gun rack in the window. What if he stopped, stayed with the collapsed man until help arrived? What if he got the VW bus towed and repaired at his own expense? Would we be surprised? See that is the entire point of Jesus’ parables. Jesus was a radical, social reformer. He told stories to shock people into examining their way of thinking and the accepted status quo. We’ve gotten away from that sort of preaching, although I admit I veer in that direction from time to time.

If your response to the retelling of the story is, “But Reverend Joy, you’re just using stereotypes in the story. There are good people who drive Mercedes.”

Well, exactly. Using stereotypes is precisely how we lump people into categories that we dismiss, devalue and dehumanize. And THAT is how we rationalize that it is ok to not let those stereotypes have the same rights and benefits as others have. THAT is how we stop caring about what happens to them. THAT is how we rationalize our own judgments and yes, hatred. Any of those stereotypes in the story that raised a little disgust in your own inner dialog? How often do we say, “Well if you vote this way, you must be \_\_\_\_\_”? If you own a gun, don’t speak English, listen to heavy metal, have expensive liquor in your cabinet, have this skin color, date these people, attend this college, love this sports team.....we honestly have millions of ways to classify, label and stereotype people. And it always comes down to US and THEM. Like me is my neighbor and not like me is not my neighbor.

Jesus, we don’t call him the master teacher for nothing, had an answer. If you have trouble identifying your neighbor, do you have trouble identifying your enemy? Over in Luke 6 Jesus totally messes with you. “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus is really unreasonable and relentless in this love business and he expects us to be relentless in love too. Is it too much?

As a lawyer I feel compelled to bring up that in our society, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have some sort of laws we call “The Good Samaritan” laws. In fact, many countries around the globe have similar laws. What are those you ask? They are laws that try to protect people who help out from being sued by the people they help, in an effort to encourage people not to withhold help for fear of making a mistake or being liable. Not all help is equal. The laws cover a variety of situations varying by state and offer different levels of immunity and protection from lawsuits, based on certain circumstances. For example, newer Good Samaritan laws cover those who respond to drug overdoses and those who break car windows to rescue vulnerable humans and pets left in hot cars. It is a little disheartening that we need laws around the globe to encourage people to help one another.

Another disheartening presentation can be found on the Southern Poverty Law Centers map of hate groups in the United States. A Hate Group is defined as “a group with beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.” A group that not only stakes out a claim for groups who are “not my neighbor” but acts in hurtful ways towards those groups.

Pennsylvania is not at the top of the list of states with multiple hate groups but we are pretty far up from the bottom. It is sobering to look at the names of the groups and their distribution in states including California, Texas and Florida, as well as our own state.

Fred Rogers, on the other hand, started his neighborhood over in Pittsburgh. A television icon for preschool children beginning in 1968, he was a Presbyterian minister. Unlike the more academic readiness program, *Sesame Street*, Roger's Neighborhood program says they focused "on the child's developing psyche and feelings and sense of moral and ethical reasoning". Rogers ended each show by saying, "You've made this day a special day, by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world like you; and I like you just the way you are." Well who would *not* like to hear that? And you don't have to be 3 years old to want to be acknowledged as special just the way you are. Rogers invited you to be his neighbor; he invited everyone to be his neighbor. Do we? Who do we invite to be our neighbors? How do we become more relentless in love; more inclusive in our circle of neighbors; more open to seeing and dismantling the barriers we've created?

Brené Brown says the antidote to dehumanizing is to "get up close". Not invading everyone's personal space but engaging others one on one. How interested are you in the story someone else has? It fascinates me to learn of synchronicities and similarities between myself and total strangers I meet in waiting areas, restaurants, airplanes or just anywhere. I have a personal practice of challenging myself when I can feel resistance rising to interacting with someone. Last time I was at the doctor's office, I had a reaction to the woman who called my name. It was the tilt of her head, the way her jawline was set, the very unnatural color of her hair, and my first thought was, "OH NO! This is not my regular nurse." My second thought was, "OK, I'm going to connect with this person." Walking back to the exam room, I started a conversation. I looked for ways to connect with the work she was doing. We found common ground. By the time my exam was over we were both smiling. She came back a couple times to make sure I had what I needed. Simple, everyday stuff. We really have to start with the small stuff or we'll never get to the skills and willingness to move to the big stuff.

What about really big stuff? What about James Alex Fields Jr who drove from his home in Ohio to drive his car into a group of people opposing the Unite the Right group rally in Charlottesville, Virginia? He killed Heather Heyer and injured others. He has been without remorse his actions or motivation.

He was sentenced to life in prison plus 419 years. How do you get close to someone like that? First of all, we're probably not going to have a conversation with him. Secondly, Jesus said "Love your neighbor" not "Love the stuff your neighbor does". So we have to begin to see beyond judging the actions and know that there is another human and divine being in the body of James Fields. Whatever we think about his beliefs and his actions, we focus on acknowledging his being-ness. We don't have to psychoanalyze what he did or how he got to where he is to connect with the essence of divinity that remains the truth of his being.

What about stuff that hits close to home? The chants of "send her home" hit close to my heart and were not that abstract. I have two children who were not born in this country. Although both are naturalized citizens, I cannot imagine the devastation if *my children* were sent back to the country where they were born. I know that the color of their skin makes them subject to bias I can't know. This is the connection that makes the women being attacked real to me. Now how do I connect with the chanters? The intellectual part of me wants to separate them from myself in consciousness and seeks to pity them—because they are not enlightened—they don't have a higher consciousness. Not a good answer. Back to connecting with the essence of divinity that remains the truth of their being. Some of these folks I might actually be in a position to talk to. I have found that some people, including me, change their attitudes when they have an opportunity to get up close to faces connected to big abstract issues. I don't condone any rhetoric that condemns people based on race or ethnicity or country of origin. However, I can't condemn the people saying those things as being less than I am in our divinity. I can *model* seeing the divine in all beings by doing that with them! Without name calling or shaming, these are my neighbors as much as the people they want to send away. NO ONE wants to be told they don't belong. Perhaps that is the crux of loving your neighbor—casting no one out of the circle of belonging because of what they think or say or do. Everyone has a place at the table—even if I quietly hope it's not next to me. This humor is our humanity winking while we struggle to align with the divine in everyone. The gift, when we are able to connect, is the flow of love and wisdom and compassion that allows us to hear each other and actually be in a position to find solutions for the highest good of all. That is a prize worth working for.