



SUNDAY SERMON

Love God. Love Your Neighbor.

DATE

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PREACHER

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Jesus, you told us: "Love God. Love our neighbor. Some days that's harder than it sounds. So we pray, show us, Jesus; teach us your Way. Amen

Standing up in this pulpit and trying to say something substantive about what's going on in our lives individually and collectively has never felt so precarious as in the past year or so. I get up here acutely aware that the opportunities to offend and disappoint are legion. Why? Because we're all living in a state of heightened vigilance with any number of triggers set to go off in a flash.

We're past the midterms so at least the tension around that unknown has abated – for most of the nation. Because for the most part, this is not a shy and retiring crowd, I know that some of you are sorely disappointed that I or we have not been more outspoken on a variety of recent issues. I also know that some of you feel that I or we are too political, or too politically one-sided, that you are at risk of being ostracized for your minority position.

Are race relations worse these days? Is economic disparity greater? Are men more misogynistic, abuse more rampant? Are you, our children, at greater risk of school shootings? Is social media luring more vulnerable individuals, giving voice to more extreme views? Is xenophobic nationalism actually on the rise? Is the political aisle truly wider and filled with more alligators? Wow. That's a rough list. Are these things all really worse, or are they more visible? Either way, they are really occupying space in the imaginations of our hearts, and for some of us in the very lived reality of day-to-day existence. No wonder we feel tense, wary, on edge. It's a good thing the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. It does, right? Dr. King said so.

Speaking of which, growing up in the era of civil rights and race relations, women's rights, gay rights, I was suckled on a Gospel of social justice, bedrock conviction that Jesus' love is ever expanding. It's my core. Yet, when I speak of "social justice" I effectively announce a particular analysis of social construct that likely has political implications, prompting some hearers to presume a particular agenda on my part. I just learned that "social justice warrior" is now a pejorative term used to mock the likes of me. Our language both enables and inhibits our capacity for dialogue and understanding.

So, you didn't come here today to hear me rant or to get all your anxiety's heightened. But if we're reading the same Bible, you knew Jesus wasn't simply going to offer some soothing salve to smooth away all these very real troubles in the world.

In this third sermon of the series, I've got a project to propose. It's about building the Kingdom of God – by loving God and, here's the kicker: by loving our neighbor. I already invited us to daily practice to mind the gap – see the world as it is, envision the world as it ought to be; mind the gap, and take a step

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each day to make the world as it is a bit more like it ought to be. I reflected that true discipleship comes through submitting our own will, and willfulness to the will of God for the good of others. Now, we have a mission to fulfill, a Gospel to proclaim, a kingdom, a commonwealth to build.

Context: Picture a map of the world and spread it out before you. Overlay upon it a bull's eye, with rings expanding outward, with Jerusalem in the center of the bull's eye. Can you see it – Jerusalem in the center of your map? Luke, the evangelist, author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, must have envisioned this map as a geographic literary device. Luke's Gospel begins on the outer perimeters of the known world and, through the narrative, Jesus moves steadily, inevitably inward to Jerusalem in the climax of Jesus' confrontation with the authorities, his crucifixion, and resurrection. All in to the center.

The Book of Acts picks up immediately after the resurrection, with the apostles waiting in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes upon them and sends them fanning out, bearing the Good News to the far reaches of the known world. The ripples of that resurrection continue to the present day. When we catch up with them in today's reading, the apostles have gone out from Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas have gone well up into modern-day Turkey, then back to Antioch in what is now Syria. Later, Paul will make it across the Aegean to Athens and eventually to Rome.

But a debate arises among the leaders of the nascent church. Some say that in order to be baptized, to become a follower of Jesus, one must first follow the Torah, the Law of Moses, and be circumcised. This was, for them, an essential, natural, obvious prerequisite – because it was the path they had taken; it was born of their own experience. Jesus himself, and all the early disciples, were Jewish. But others contend that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Jew and Gentile alike without prerequisite; anyone and everyone was welcome. Jesus himself said he had come as a light to the Gentiles; the apostles witnessed the conversion of countless non-Jewish households – especially as the Gospel reached into Hellenistic and Roman culture.

The stakes on this were exceedingly high. Why? Because it was about access to the community, access to the holy, to salvation. A classic border dispute about who is in and who is out, about what is required in order to be one of us. And because each person arrived at his or her position through their own lived experience, their customs, traditions, lenses, prejudices, and hopes for the future. In that climate, the opportunities to offend were legion, the trajectory and outcome of the Christian project still completely unknown.

But you know what they did? They met, together. And they talked about it. This was important enough that, while they'd already fanned out across the Mediterranean, they came back to Jerusalem; no small effort. They named their stuff. This is the very first council of the church. We have the detailed minutes right here. So we know that each person spoke and talked about their own path – of their own first experience of Jesus – how he stirred and moved them, then of the people they met along the way, how they'd witnessed the movement of God and the Holy Spirit at work in their own and other's lives. Paul and Barnabas spoke. Peter spoke, as did others. They pored over the Scriptures and found that the prophet Amos – centuries before Jesus – had announced salvation for the Gentiles. The concluding judgment, articulated by Jesus' brother James, did not require circumcision yet called for respect of Jewish tradition. And they issued a statement to all the congregations.

A few more things about the Council of Jerusalem - and you can go ahead and start listening for parallels to our situation because, yes, that's where I'm headed. 1) This disagreement had a long prehistory. It flared up in Antioch but had been brewing for a long time – with Jesus, the rabbi, loving on everybody. 2) The primary evidence offered is personal testimony, and personal testimony shaped largely by the individual's experience of God. 3) James' summary judgment managed, brilliantly, to accept the personal testimony of the missionaries to the Gentiles while

loving on everybody. 2) The primary evidence offered is personal testimony, and personal testimony shaped largely by the individual's experience of God. 3) James' summary judgment managed, brilliantly, to accept the personal testimony of the missionaries to the Gentiles while maintaining the Jewish heritage. Neither position had to make unreasonable concession or accommodation; instead James offered a theological affirmation of each as a critical part of a more robust whole. 4) The present disagreement has a long post-history. The Council didn't resolve all the differences. 5) Open disagreement between earnest believers is primary theology: how we are, how we act, with our neighbor is a direct reflection of how we are with God.

Most important: they began from polarized positions of difference – from their respective theological, cultural, tribal identities. They resolved it through remembering from whence they came and to whom they were headed – the same, one, living, loving God. They realized and affirmed their very real human differences – and recognized and embraced the desire and movement of God that they be one, one body, one community.

I'm telling you: this is all right here in the Book of Acts.

So, here's my proposal: that we do today what those disciples did then: gather for honest conversation about our lived experiences – and differences – with particular intention to engage those whose experience and views we know to be different from our own. Not to persuade, but to understand, even to love. And in those different stories to trust that we will find and know the underlying love of God.

Given today's climate with all those triggers, God is calling for the church to be the place in our lives where there is enough respect, honor, and holiness for us to speak our truths – and hear and hold one another's truths – with humility, vulnerability and integrity. Not tip-toeing about as if in polite society. There's too much at stake.

Through the years, many here have already ventured to share ourselves with others – our stories, our pain, our brokenness – and in so doing have experienced unforeseen healing and grace.

Salvation does not depend on you or me. I don't believe such conversations are about us creating connections between one another. I believe such conversations are an occasion for God to reveal to us the connections already here, created by God. By grace, God may reveal to us what is already true: that we – the big "we" – are all one body.

Let us pray. Dear God, we are your children. Envelop us in your love. When we're having a hard time loving our neighbor, having a hard time loving ourselves, loving you, shed your light and love upon us. Show us the Way. Embrace us. Overwhelm us with your holy love. Amen.