

“God’s Greatest Love For the Least”

B, Pentecost 24; Mark 12:28-34
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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. A LITTLE TOUCHED?

During the course of earning her master's degree, a woman found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory, Vermont to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of her road. He was always there, in sub zero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree. She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening. Perhaps it was a stubborn habit, private grief or a mental disorder.

Finally, she asked a neighbor of hers, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?" "Oh, yes," said her neighbor, "many times." "Is he a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?" The neighbor laughed and said, "He's no more touched than you or me. And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you're okay, he goes home to bed."

(Keith Wagner, *Almost Heaven*, adapted from Garret Keizer, *Watchers in the Night*)

II. JESUS CHALLENGE

Jesus encounters a challenge from one of the great teachers of the law. Surprise! It’s actually a pretty “friendly spar” here in Mark. The Teacher overhears Jesus debating with the Sadducees about resurrection and marriage, and notices that Jesus had given them a good answer. So the Teacher of the Law chimes in with the “Bonus Question” like Alex Tribeck and “Double Jeopardy.”

“Of *all* the commandments, which is the most important?” And Jesus gives the answer we all know well. And the teacher says “Yes! You got it. Loving the Lord your God with your heart, soul and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself IS more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And, now it’s Jesus’ turn to say, “Well done, Teacher, *you* have answered wisely. And they enjoy their mutual admiration society for a moment.

And....Mark concludes, “From then on no one dared ask him any more questions.”

In Luke’s Gospel, however, the person that challenges Jesus and the onlookers, get a story. The Great Commandment is followed up with a great example, for “Who is my neighbor and what does it *look like* to love him or her?” is a crucial piece of this lesson.

That story is called the Good Samaritan.

III. WHAT MANNER OF LOVE IS THIS?

For us, with Mark's scripture today, it's up to *us* to fill in "the rest of the story." Who is my neighbor and what does it look like to love him or her in our context, in our day and time?

Let's look around. Where do we see people loving God with their whole heart and soul *by* loving their neighbors, themselves? Where is God's greatest love shown for the least of these?

A. Hurricane victims themselves, helping others.

LUMBERTON, N.C. (AP) — They know what it's like to suffer from a devastating hurricane, so chefs and volunteers from Puerto Rico are helping out in a North Carolina city damaged by Hurricane Florence.

Chef Lionel Rodriguez and others with a group called Operation Pay It Forward are preparing meals at the East Lumberton Baptist Church. Spokesman Jesus Flores said Wednesday the group arrived Monday and will serve lunch and dinner through Oct. 13.

San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz organized the delegation, which is working through Operation Blessing, a Virginia-based nonprofit.

Flores says Operation Blessing volunteers are serving about 2,000 meals per day.

Puerto Rico is struggling to recover from Hurricane Maria, which killed almost 3,000 people and caused damages estimated at more than \$100 billion last year.

Jesus said: "When I was hungry, you fed me....."

B. Doctors and Nurses care for the Shooter

...The doctor who treated the shooter in the hospital was Jewish, and belonged to the Tree of Life synagogue. The shooter shouted slurs at him as he delivered him medical attention. The doctor said that caring for him was a proud moment.

What manner of Love is this? (Yvette Flunder)

I saw this post by a pastor the other day and immediately wanted to know more!

ABC NEWS: The man who allegedly shot up a Pittsburgh synagogue Saturday and killed 11 people in what is likely the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history was later treated by Jewish medical staffers for his wounds.

The mass shooting suspect, 46-year-old Robert Bowers, was reportedly shot multiple times as law enforcement responded to the attack and was then taken to Allegheny General for treatment.

The suspect — who had a history of posting racist and anti-Jewish statements online — reportedly yelled during the attack, "All Jews must die."

"Isn't it ironic that somebody who is yelling in the ambulance and in the hospital, 'I want to kill all the Jews,' is taken care of by a Jewish nurse (whose father is a rabbi) and there's a Jewish hospital

president that comes in to check on him afterwards?" Cohen is a member of the Tree of Life—Or L'Simcha synagogue that was attacked, he told the Pennsylvania-based Tribune-Review. His mother-in-law often attended services there and knew many of those who were killed.

Cohen: "I thought it was important to at least talk to him and meet him, You can't on one hand say we should talk to each other and then I don't talk to him. So you lead by example."

"I wanted to try and understand why did he do this. And I have no answers," Cohen told the network, adding that the suspect "listens to the noise" and is "completely confused."

"He had a mother once, or maybe still does. He was loved by a family," Cohen told the Tribune-Review. "How do you get from here to there?" Cohen told CNN he was proud of his medical staffers, who he said, despite their "conflicting emotions," fulfilled their mission to "take care of sick people [and not] ask questions of who they are."

Jesus said: "When I was sick, you cared for me. When I was in prison, you visited me. When I was your enemy, you reached out to me and saw my humanity."

C. Muslims paying for funerals of the synagogue murder victims

NEW YORK — A fundraiser organized by two Muslim-American groups for the victims of Saturday's deadly shooting in a Pittsburgh synagogue reached its goal of raising \$150,000 from about 3,600 donors in just over 48 hours. Some of the money is already on the way to victims and their families, and organizers say they hope to cover the funeral costs for all 11 people who were killed.

The fundraiser is a joint effort by the groups Celebrate Mercy and MPower Change. It reached its initial goal of \$25,000 in just under six hours after being launched Saturday afternoon. The fundraiser welcomes contributions from donors regardless of faith.

"Initially it was intended to be a gesture of solidarity," said Linda Sarsour, the co-founder of MPower Change, in an interview with CBS News on Monday. "We wanted to give more than just 'thoughts and prayers.'"

D. Rubbing Elbows in your Neighborhood

Susan Thistlethwaite, a UCC pastor, seminary professor and theologian who spoke here last Spring, practices "public theology" in Vail County. Susan shares her experiences in hopes of breaking down barriers and encouraging bridge-building by all of us:

Today I had a lengthy conversation with a Mexican American contractor about the "Caravan." He told me, in his former village, the drug dealers cut off people's heads in public who oppose them. He and I discussed the "Caravan" and I shared the theological reframing

as an Exodus. He was so touched, he teared up. The context was my iPhone battery was dying so I went to this wonderful local phone/computer support center started by young Hispanic immigrants in our town.

They are terrific, know their stuff, and since I don't know a lot of tech, I am there frequently! It is also kind of Hispanic central for the valley, as they are all Spanish speakers and most customers are Spanish speakers. They are also very busy and you have to wait, so they have a really nice waiting area. By now, I know what most of the young people are studying at the local community college, and I may very well hire the contractor. Also, my Spanish is improving.

E. An Audience with the Pope and World Leaders

Sometimes, loving your neighbor gets to happen right in your own neighborhood, and other times in happens on a global scale. An opportunity to express what loving God and neighbor means for you. Rev. Traci Blackmon, one of our top UCC pastors and leaders, literally got an “audience with the Pope” last month—rubbed elbows with him a bit and shared some laughs and appreciation of one another’s concern for the world.

Here’s how she expressed “loving your neighbor” at a global gathering:

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, representing the United Church of Christ, addressed a global gathering of religious leaders called The Rome Conference. As a Christian leader who takes loving your neighbor very

seriously, she called for a renewed commitment by the Church to speak out against racism, white supremacy and a society that "favors some of God's creation over others."

“There are those who will say the church should not be political. But I disagree. The very birth of the Christ child was both a holy and political act. The Jesus story, in its historical context, reveals both human terror and divine grace, both human suffering and supernatural deliverance. The Jesus described in the Bible had more in common with the children of refugees born today than we might be comfortable imagining. Jesus was an Afro-Semitic Palestinian whose family was displaced due to terror and political turmoil. The church of Jesus the Christ cannot be *apolitical*. There is no middle of the road on matters of injustice.”

Blackmon appealed to the group to live by and lead with love. "A moral law by which all people of faith must live. And that law is LOVE! We are people of Faith. People of faith must lead with LOVE. People of faith must legislate with LOVE. People of faith must be governed by LOVE. People of faith must fight. Always. For LOVE. If it is not LOVE – It is not GOD."

Blackmon had words of encouragement for us all on *how* to do that – “Just BE the Church. With the number of churches we have – if each church committed to making a difference, just in the circumference of their space, we could change the world. We could change people," she said. "What

people really want is to know that they matter and to belong somewhere. If the church doesn't provide that, somebody else will."

Later at an audience with Pope Francis, Blackmon and his holiness shared a laugh, as he expressed appreciation for her work, and the work of the conference.

F. Love is Contagious

John Pavlovitz, pastor, speaker and prophetic and honest writer who will be coming to Buena Vista next Spring says this of that "neighbor love:"

"Real love is contagious. It is infectious. When something is purely of God, it can't be contained within the walls we fashion for it. This kind of love always yields a fruit that can't be managed or manufactured or scheduled. Jesus said this was the expectation-defying, unpredictable activity of the Spirit that would characterize his people (John 3:8)

When I was "the least of these," you showed me the greatest love of all –the Love of God."

G. Love is a Many-faceted thing

Finally, Frederick Buechner sums up all love for us:

The love for equals is a human thing--of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing--the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the

failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing--to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy--love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The love of the tortured for the torturer. This is God's love. It conquers the world.

(Frederick Buechner in his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*.)

IV. RIGHT HERE AND NEAR

So now, we write the "rest of the Story."

Jesus gave the Good Samaritan example to his people in their place and time. What is our story for our circle?

What did you see and hear this week, and yesterday at the Bazaar, as examples of loving God, our neighbors, ourselves?

--Janet Jones – text

Thanks. I'm doing fine. We are on our way to DeBeque, CO for hunting camp with Steven and Kira's family. Del has driven the whole way and we are almost there. We won't be at church tomorrow, sorry. Everyone worked hard this week and I believe we all had fun and worked together for the common good. Our church family is truly amazing and everyone involved in this event did themselves proud and had fun while doing it AND many of us got to know

each other a little better and even made new friends. I was very proud of Del as he was way out of his element and put in a full days work. See you next week and hugs right back atcha.

--Joe Gibbens –working through his grief around his parents' illnesses and death. Created beautiful artwork and donated it to the Bazaar and the pastor's study.

--Janet Steiner—directed the Bazaar AND kept working on Choir, MSG, Christmas Program and Chorale efforts right along with the Bazaar. AND, stayed pleasant and patience throughout!

--Matthew – grief counseling in the Baked Goods room as we cried together and heard the story of a dog's early demise this week when he had an unfortunate encounter with a neighbor named Buck.

--Hiking group – saved another neighbor's dog from being a Mountain Lion's Burrito Lunch!

--People from the community saying over and over how warmly welcomed they felt in our church— wanting to introduce me to their family. Enjoying community together.

--Other churches doing Bazaar Day all together!

Here's your homework for today:
Share your stories – at coffee hour and throughout the week with notes and conversations. Where are you seeing radical love of neighbor far and wide? Where are you loving yourself and taking care of your own heart, body and soul?

V. A LITTLE TOUCHED?

The woman driving home in the dark was wondering if the man who was being a true neighbor to her was “a little touched!” Then, she was truly touched when she learned what he was doing and why. Motivated by love and concern for a neighbor he didn't know yet.

Let's be a little touched!

It's time for Sabbath rest, after the High Holy Days of Bazaar. Let us take a deep breath, give thanks to God with our whole hearts, give a hug and word of appreciation to our fellow-laborers in this amazing effort, watch out for our neighbors—friends and strangers alike, and show them love in every way we can, and love ourselves by putting down the coffee cups we're carrying and plates we're juggling for a time.

Put down the burdens, the worries, and concern about there not being enough to go around – of love, energy, time, resources, and come to the Table. The Table of abundance. Of the cup that never stops flowing; the bread that never stops rising and breaking and sharing.

Come to the Table that never stops growing wider and deeper, adding a place for every soul.

Come to the Table. Let your heart, soul and strength find there the God of never-ending Love and welcome. Find yourself wrapped in arms of Divine

Presence and abundant food and drink for your hungry
and tired self and plenty to share with your neighbor.

Where Would Jesus Lead?

He'd lead us to the Table. The Table of Grace. The
Table of "come as you are!" "Who you are, fully.
Loved, embraced by God."

Let us continue to worship the Lord as we bring the
bread and wine to the Table.

*Bringing the bread and the wine to the table,
asking that we may be led and enabled,
truly united to build new communities,
worship and work must be one.*

Amen.

Let us join in our Communion prayer together:

The Table With No Edges, by Andrew King

We will sit down where feet tire from the journey.

We will sit down where grief bends the back.

We will sit down under roofs wrecked by artillery.

We will sit down where cries sound from cracked walls.

We will sit down where heat beats like hammers.

We will sit down where flesh shivers in cold.

We will sit down where bread bakes on thin charcoal.

We will sit down where there is no grain in baked
fields.

We will sit down with those who dwell in ashes.
We will sit down in shadow and in light.

We will sit down, making friends out of strangers.
We will sit down, our cup filled with new wine.

We will sit down and let love flow like language.
We will sit down where speech needs no words.

We will sit together at the table with no edges.
We will sit to share one loaf, in Christ's name, in one
world.