**Love God. Love Your Neighbor** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Stewardship Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Since we last met, we’ve experienced another divisive election in which approximately half of the Christians in this country voted for one party and the other half voted for the other.

If your candidate was on *the losing end,* it’s cold comfort to know that incumbent parties around the globe *of all ideologies* are getting crushed right now by voter anger over *post-COVID inflation.*

According to foreign policy expert, Ian Bremmer, *“over the past year, most incumbents around the globe have either been forced out of office or seriously underperformed at the ballot box (e.g., in the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany, Austria, India, South Africa, etc.). Those who haven’t faced voters yet are deeply unpopular and expected to lose power soon (e.g., Canada, Germany, Norway, etc.).”*

And, as we know, our recent election has been no different.

Let’s think about these things in light of today’s gospel reading.

It is hard to imagine a more perfect gospel reading for the Sunday after the election.*Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.* As Jesus said, *“there is no other commandment greater than these.”*

Even the skeptical questioner who came asking which commandment was the greatest was satisfied with Jesus’ answer. *You are right, Teacher — this is the most important thing.*

A few weeks ago, I (along with a lot of other Pastors around the country) was invited to screen a new film — [*Leap of Faith*](https://substack.com/redirect/0c124d1c-a0a2-42c9-b742-22049f14f6b9?j=eyJ1IjoiMzVucjAifQ.ku3An07e2QZGJ21Zggx2tIrUJsCWgiUdmYPPWncyiwE)*.*The film is from Nicholas Ma, the same director who gifted us with *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* the lovely movie about Fred Rogers. Ma’s new project follows twelve pastors from Grand Rapids, Michigan, over the course of a year. These pastors, from diverse backgrounds with very different theological perspectives, came together to think about and practice what it means to be good neighbors during these days of intense division and political polarization.

The pastors started with great optimism — idealistically believing that gathering together amid their own differences would model for the whole community the power to love one’s neighbor and change the city.

*Instead, they learned loving one’s neighbor wasn’t easy.*

You see, one of their own number — a Methodist pastor — was a lesbian. She didn’t want to talk about that. She came to the project wanting to address racial and political division in Grand Rapids. But her presence, *her simply being in the room,* unsettled more than half of her colleagues as they made her an *“issue.”* The group was powerfully challenged as some of the group increasingly realized how hard it was to really *love*her, their sister pastor. A lesbian pastor.

As the simmering tensions became more obvious, one of the clergy said, *“You know we came here thinking that we would love our neighbors and change the city. But now, we found that the problem isn’t* ***‘out there.’*** *We might be the problem.”*

The group fell silent.

No one dared to speak.

That’s where Jesus’ words take us. Yes! Love God! Love your neighbor. *And then the stark reality.* Love him? Love her? The neighbor with the wrong political signs in their yard? *Really?* That person isn’t my neighbor — that person doesn’t count.

Maybe it is best *not*to say that. Or say anything.

According to Diana Butler Bass, one of the saddest features of *Christian nationalism* right now is how some pastors are reinterpreting passages like today’s gospel. *“Nationalism”* immediately puts limits on the question of our neighbor — your *only* neighbors are those who are citizens of your nation. And, when you add the qualifier *“Christian,”* the only neighbors who count are those who share both your religion and your citizenship. From this perspective, *“love your neighbor”* applies only to other Christians who are native-born American citizens. Indeed, in this view, true love of neighbor is *conversion* of those who aren’t Christian and forced obedience to the law. Love of neighbor means creating an ordered *“Christian America”* in conformity with narrow, cherry-picked biblical mandates.

To put it bluntly, (said Butler Bass) Christian nationalism doesn’t shut up when it hears Jesus say, *“love your neighbor as yourself.”* It keeps talking. Keeps explaining in order to explain away. But the biblical response — the deeply spiritual response — to this teaching is *silence.*

But note that the followers of Jesus *don’t try to interpret* Jesus’ command or *dim* its challenge. Instead, followers of Jesus let these clear, simple words call us to live in such a loving fashion that we eventually learn that *we ourselves*can be part of the problem when we seek a truly neighborly world.

*Silence* — the deep recognition of our own complicity in the challenge of loving our neighbors — *shouldn’t keep us from the moral calling to do so.* Indeed, silence compels us to reach beyond the limits of our hidden bigotries and quiet hatreds to act on Jesus’ command.

As one of the pastors in *Leap of Faith*eventually figured out:

*“I think a lot of people would say the world out there is getting worse, we are literally being taught to hate each other. But if there's something that we can point to and say ‘yes,’ but there's humanity, ‘yes’ there's worth, ‘yes’ there's goodness. And that’s bigger than what I’ve been taught or what I’ve been told to despise about you, you have to want that, you have to want the potential of what's possible.”*

Amplifying this, Brian McLaren invites us to practice what he calls *“revolutionary love”:*

Revolutionary love means loving as God would love: infinitely, graciously, extravagantly. To put it in more mystical terms, it means loving *with*God, letting divine love fill me and flow through me, without discrimination or limit, as an expression of the heart of the lover, not the merit of the beloved, including the correctness of the beloved’s beliefs.…

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn’t teach a list of beliefs to be memorized and recited. Instead, he teaches a way of life that culminates in a call to revolutionary love. This revolutionary love goes far beyond conventional love, the love that distinguishes between us and them, brother and other, or friend and enemy (Matthew 5:43). Instead, we need to love as God loves, with non-discriminatory love that includes even the enemy.…

We’re used to thinking of the real differences in the world as among religions: *you are Buddhist, I am Christian, she is Jewish, he is atheist.*But I wonder if that way of thinking is becoming irrelevant and perhaps even counter-productive. What if the deeper question is not whether you are a Christian, Buddhist, or atheist, but rather, *what kind of Christian, Buddhist, or atheist are you?*Are you a believer who puts your distinct beliefs first, or are you a person of faith who puts love first? Are you a believer whose beliefs put you in competition and conflict with people of differing beliefs, or are you a person of faith whose faith moves you toward the other with love?

Building on this, the *Rev. Michael Curry* reflects on the description of God’s *expansive love* found in the Bible.:

*“Love is a firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself. It can be personal or political, individual, or communal, intimate, or public. Love will not be segregated to the private, personal precincts of life. Love, as I read it in the Bible, is ubiquitous. It affects all aspects of life …*

Curry upholds such love as *a path of selfless action:*

*“Love as an action is the only thing that has ever changed the world for the better. Love is Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi…. Love is a little girl in Pakistan named Malala Yousafzai standing up to armed men who said that girls shouldn’t be educated….*

*Love is a firefighter running into a burning building, risking his or her life for people he or she doesn’t even know. Love is that first responder hurtling toward an emergency, a catastrophe, a disaster. Love is someone protesting anything that hurts or harms the children of God. Jesus said it this way, hours before his crucifixion: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s own life for one’s friends” [John 15:13].*

*Love is a commitment to seek the good and to work for the good and welfare of others. It doesn’t stop at our front door or our neighborhood, our religion or race, or our state’s or your country’s border. This is one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth, as the hymn goes….*

*Where selfishness excludes, love makes room and includes. Where selfishness puts down, love lifts up. Where selfishness hurts and harms, love helps and heals. Where selfishness enslaves, love sets free and liberates.*

*The way of love will show us the right thing to do, every single time. It is moral and spiritual grounding—and a place of rest—amid the chaos that is often part of life. It’s how we stay decent in indecent times. Loving is not always easy, but like with muscles, we get stronger both with repetition and as the burden gets heavier. And it works.”*

So, (as Diana Butler Bass forthrightly says), love your neighbor. *Not* because it is a good slogan. *Not* because it is easy. *Not* because you do it. And *not* because a candidate or a political party actually does it. *Love your neighbor because it moves us past what we’ve been taught to despise and what we’ve been manipulated to hate*. You love your neighbor because you *want to,*because you *want the potential of what’s possible.*Love your neighbor is a singularly important *aspiration*— a personal aspiration, a communal one, even a national one.

Insisting on love — real love — to bind up the wounds of this nation is something we should all *want.*And the more people who *want*a neighborly world, the more possible the potential of neighborly love becomes.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Imagine what would be possible. Imagine the potential of a more neighborly world. [Love undergirds our *stewardship*—our giving].

Do that. And may grace fill in the gaps.

I’ll leave you this morning with some reworked words from a famous Howard Thurman poem that pertain to this past week’s events:

*When the noise of campaigns is stilled,
when the signs have all been taken down,
when the politicians and the poll workers have gone home,
when the voters are back at their jobs,
the work of democracy begins:
To find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*
**— “The Work of Democracy Begins,” based on Howard Thurman’s “The Work of Christmas,”**

This is our work as Christians regardless of who wins or loses an election.