

“Jesus makes it sound so simple”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
July 10, 2016

*by Rev. Patrick David Heery*

Jesus makes it sound so simple, doesn't he? All you have to do to inherit eternal life is to love God with every fiber of your being, every hour of the day, in every breath and movement you take, and to love your neighbor—all 7.4 billion of them—with the same ferocity, devotion, and care as you love yourself. “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus says to the lawyer, as if it were no small matter.

Heck, I can't even sit through an hour of worship without my mind wandering. Five minutes into prayer, and I'm already thinking about grocery lists and whether I closed the windows before the rain started and what in the world that bizarre floating space baby means at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

And frankly, I don't know how I'm supposed to love all 7.4 billion people when half of them are trying to kill the other half. Jesus clearly has never been in a Wegmans parking lot during peak hours.

It's got to be more complicated than that, the lawyer insists. He protests that he can't possibly love and help everyone equally, so he asks, “Who *exactly* is my neighbor?”

At its heart this is a question about our limitations.

Jesus goes on, in his story of the Samaritan, to challenge one of those limitations. The law, the Torah, so aptly quoted by the lawyer, states that this love of neighbor is limited to kin, to other Israelites. A history of violence, religious disagreement, and racial politics sets up the Samaritan as particularly unworthy (and thus presumably also incapable) of this love. Jesus turns this limitation on its head by making the despised Samaritan the exemplar of faith and compassion.

We ourselves know all too well the ways in which our society has designated some as more worthy of love than others.

But the truth is that, even if we were to let go of these prejudices, we would still remain fundamentally limited in our capacity to love God and neighbor.

For finite creatures like us, every moment becomes a choice.

Do I give my time to my family or to the homeless shelter? Do I answer this phone call or focus my attention on the person I'm with? Do I give the change in my pocket to this starving person or that one?

Just this last week, two African American men were killed needlessly by police officers, adding their names to a list of 136 black people killed by police in 2016 alone. And then on Thursday, in

Dallas, five police officers were killed by a sniper. Now I don't think that our love for the police who risk their lives protecting us and our love for the communities of color that are systematically targeted, dehumanized, and treated with police violence are mutually exclusive, but it sure can feel like it.

Universal love sounds like a far fetched dream when there's blood on the streets, and when our own hands helped put it there.

Jacques Derrida, that great and often impenetrable philosopher, spent a lot of time pondering these limitations. Born in 1930 in the French colony of Algeria in northern Africa and growing up as a Jewish boy during the Nazi policies of the Vichy government, Derrida witnessed firsthand the limits of human love. Two world wars and the Shoah (the Holocaust) were proof.

Here's Derrida: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others... Day and night, at every instant... I am... raising my knife over what I love and must love, over the other, to this or that other to whom I owe absolute fidelity."

Derrida is saying that as long as the needs of those we are called to love conflict, we are fated to fail the greatest commandment.

Now, it's good to have ideals that challenge us to be better than we are. But if our hope for a better and eternal life is contingent on our achievement of the greatest command, then it would seem we are destined not only for failure, but also despair. Because that means we'll never get there.

But remember, our passage tells us that the lawyer wasn't asking because he wanted hope; he was asking because he wanted a "test," a trial.

He wants a rubric to determine the saved from the unsaved, the good from the bad. He wants confirmation that he indeed is among the righteous.

So Jesus plays his little game and asks what rubric the law provides.

And here's where it gets interesting: Jesus doesn't set up this standard. This oft-quoted verse isn't spoken by Jesus. It's spoken by the lawyer, and when Jesus says the lawyer has given the right answer, it's not to the question about eternal life; it's to the question about what the law says, the same law that the apostle Paul says condemns us.

Now this doesn't mean that Jesus is saying we shouldn't love God and neighbor. But it does mean that this human effort to achieve perfect love is not where Jesus places his hope for life.

For Jesus, there is only one rubric, one sacrifice, sufficient to achieve life, and it is the cross that leaves none forsaken.

In other words, what we cannot do, God can.

What must we do to inherit eternal life, to be loved? Nothing. It's a gift. Such love cannot be earned, and need not be.

Instead of a judge (no offense to any judges in our midst), we have in God, Jesus tells us when he teaches the Lord's Prayer, a father and a friend. The point is not to measure love, as if it could be scored; it is to allow God's love to flow through us as mercy—on ourselves and on others—because we are the recipients of mercy.

Before this interaction with the lawyer, Jesus emphasizes how hard it is to be a disciple and that all the wisdom and best intentions in the world won't be enough. If you're going to make it, Jesus says, you're going to need two things: you're going to need God's help, and you're going to need each other. You can't do this alone on your merit, Jesus says, so he commissions 70 disciples to go into the world in pairs, never alone.

I have no doubt that we are indeed called by this parable to imitate the Samaritan's boundary-crossing, self-endangering compassion. But, we're not the Samaritan in this story; we're the person lying in the ditch. Christ, and the collective body of Christ, is the one who kneels and tends our wounds.

Now, note an inversion in this story. The lawyer defined "neighbor" as someone who needs *his* help. In Jesus' story, however, the "neighbor" is the one offers the help, the one who takes care of *us*.

We, like the lawyer, spend so much energy trying to be perfect and worthy of love, to be invulnerable and in control, asking as little as possible from those around us.

But, in this story, and in the whole of the gospel, Jesus is telling us that we don't get to pretend to be OK. We don't get to draw lines between the good and the bad.

Last Sunday, as I lay huddled on the floor, gripping my head in a migraine, I was determined still to lead worship. I didn't want to let you down. I told myself to be strong, that if I was just a better pastor, I could push through the pain. And when it became clear that I wasn't strong enough, I became afraid. I was afraid you'd think me a disappointment, that you wouldn't like me anymore. I was afraid I would be unmasked as the weak, cowering, and bullied boy I once was and perhaps still am.

Then a miracle happened. I showed you my limitation, and instead of turning away from me, you cared for me. You stepped in and did a beautiful service, without hesitation. All week I've received an amazing outpouring of concern and love.

Pastor David Lose writes, "We are also invited, I believe, to be a community that is also bound together by our shared need, by an awareness of our common vulnerability."

The bad news is that you're not strong enough. The good news is that you don't need to be. You don't need to be perfect or in control. Because you've got this amazing God and this whole community to step up to bat for you.

When we dare to call out, each from our own private ditches, inviting God and this community into our spaces of hurt and vulnerability, we are not made weak; we are healed. Now, go and do likewise. **Amen.**