

Series: Walking in the Way of Love

“The Reach of Love”

Introduction: As we begin to come back together and enjoy community in an in-person way again, I’ve felt a tug to begin putting a sermon series together which I’ve entitled, “Walking in the Way of Love.” It comes out of a question I’ve been often asked in these pandemic months: “How’s the church doing?” When I ask what they mean, it usually focuses on concern about the giving. Are we managing to “stay afloat?” Well, I’m pleased to report that, thanks to your generosity, we are doing just fine in that regard.

But, while stewardship is important, the real question we want to ask when we ask how our church, or any church, is doing, focuses not on our giving, but on our loving. How are we doing when it comes to loving one another, both in the church, and outside of the church? That’s the real measure of church health, and one I thought it would be helpful to think about as we come back together into community. What does real love really look like?

The series title, “Walking in the Way of Love,” comes out the exhortation Paul gives to the Ephesian church as he seeks to help them think about what it means to live in light of all that Jesus had done for them. Paul writes:

Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us . . . (Ephesians 5:1-2).

What does real love look like? Paul here summarizes what the rest of the NT affirms: real love looks like the sacrificial love of Jesus. *Just as* Jesus loved us, he calls us to love one another. Walking in the way of love is walking in the way of the cross. Paul draws his thinking from the very words of Jesus:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it (Luke 9:23-24).

What might walking in the way of love, taking up our cross, look like in our families, at our places of work, in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our church? As someone has put the question: When pondering what to say or do, consider what love would ask of you. What might love be asking of us?

To think about that, we need not only to think about the “how,” but we actually need to begin with the “who.” Just who are we to love? The quick answer is, “our neighbor.” But just, who, exactly, is that? It’s likely that in these days of political and racial and spiritual strife, that we’ve thought a bit about that. Jesus seeks to help us along through the very familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. In this text, Jesus challenges us to think about the reach of love. It features people walking all over the place, from a traveler who walks into a heap of trouble, to two religious leaders who walk on by without doing anything, to a Samaritan who shockingly walks the extra mile of mercy. Let’s listen. [READ]

Jesus’ interaction with this “expert in the law” is just as important as the parable Jesus tells. It is driven forward by four questions which Jesus trades with this man, kind of like they are hitting a tennis ball back and forth. Let’s use them to help us walk through the text.

I. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

A. The opening question is asked by a man, an “expert in the law,” whose job was to understand and apply for the people the law of God as handed down to them by Moses. He’s a bit like a Bible scholar or theology professor, and it was an honored role. These experts were to keep God’s word from being misused by those who might be trying to drum up authority for themselves. Jesus had certainly begun to draw a crowd, enough to make the scholar wonder: “Who is this guy? What’s he all about? Is he a fraud, or a false prophet?”

B. So, seeking Jesus out, he asked him the question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Luke tells us that the man asked it in order to test Jesus. In fact we see throughout the gospel accounts that the religious leaders liked to play a game we could call “stump the rabi.” That is, they would ask questions aimed at tripping Jesus up in some way, or getting him to say something that would turn the growing crowds against him. But this expert might also have been truly curious. The topic of the question, eternal life, was deadly serious. What do we need to do to get in synch with what God is up to in the world, to live the life that is truly life, to experience life with God that begins now and continues into eternity?

II. “What is written in the Law?”

A. In response, Jesus asks a question of his own. Elie Wiesel, the Jewish novelist and spiritual writer, was once asked by an interviewer: “I have noticed that you Jews often answer a question by asking a question. Why do you do this? Wiesel replied, “Why not?” Jesus knew that the best way to invite dialogue and to help the expert know that Jesus valued his opinion, was to ask him for it. So, Jesus asked, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

B. As he prepared to answer, the lawyer must’ve been smiling inside. For, it seems as if he knew the answer Jesus had given to another expert in the law when that expert had asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment. Jesus had named two. He responded: “*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: *Love you neighbor as yourself.*” (Mk. 12:29-31; cf. Ma. 22:34-40). In other words, the two go together and, like two sides of a coin, cannot be separated. Vertical love for God was to be manifested through horizontal love for neighbor. So, this is the answer the expert gave back to Jesus.

C. “Nailed it!” he must’ve thought. Jesus, it seemed, agreed. “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. But, he wasn’t done. He went on: “Do this and you will live.” Now, this might make us a little uneasy. Is Jesus teaching works righteousness, that we earn our salvation by what we do? It’s by grace that we have been saved, through faith, Paul reminds the Ephesian congregation (2:8). Yet this is the same Paul who, later in the letter, as we heard a few minutes ago, writes that these folks were to do for others as Christ had done for them. And it’s the same Paul who, when writing to the Galatian congregation, said that “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6). Faith, belief, throughout the NT is never just mental assent but overflows into love.

III. “And who is my neighbor?”

A. At this point, the real issue begins to surface for the expert in the law. Taking his turn in the question game, he asks: “And who is my neighbor?” He asked because he wanted to justify himself. The unabridged version of his question goes something like this: “How far, exactly, does my love need to

reach? What is the minimum amount of neighbor-loving I can get away with? Where can I draw the line and say that beyond this, I don't need to go?"

B. What comes to mind when you hear the word "neighbor?" Where would you like to draw the line? At those of a different political persuasion? At those of a different color? At those of a different understanding of what sexuality is supposed to look like? At those who hold a different belief system than yours? At someone who bullied you in middle school? The temptation is to draw it to include people just like us, but no further. It's where ancient Jews had been inclined to draw it. The law, in Leviticus, stated: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Notice that a Jew's neighbor was a Jew's people. It was other Jews. But, just like an American is not just a white person of European descent, though some would like that to be the definition, neither, said Jesus, is a neighbor any longer just someone like you. Jesus came to show us that real love needs to reach further than that.

C. To begin to deconstruct their ethnic concept of neighbor, and break up hardened hearts, Jesus figured a story would be a useful tool. It's familiar, I think. An unidentified, unnamed traveler is heading up a dangerous stretch of road. He's mugged, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left lying on the road half-dead. Two fellows come along, Jewish religious leaders, a priest and a Levite (a pastor and a lay leader). They didn't stop. We're not told why. What's important is that they did nothing to help. Then a third fellow comes along. We learn he's a Samaritan. Three cheers! The poor mugged man must've had his cell phone with him and remembered the number on that billboard that says call the Samaritans if you need help!

D. No, not at that time in history. The Samaritans were a mixed-race people with a kind of funky theology; they and the Jews had been enemies for centuries. There was a huge racial and theological divide between the two. It must've been almost too hard to hear Jesus tell it. Not only did he make the Samaritan the hero, he made him an extra-mile, are-you-kidding-me, who-would-do-that kind of hero! He didn't just pity the man; he bandaged his wounds, used his donkey to transport him, spent the whole night caring for him, and made arrangements for that care to continue and be charged for it, so the man's recovery could be sustained. This was so over the top. Few in Jesus' audience would do anything of the sort for a Samaritan, and no Samaritan would show that level of concern for a Jew. Could love really reach that far? It's what Jesus would have us consider . . .

IV. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor...?"

A. The last question, and the last word, belonged to Jesus. First the question: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer apparently could not even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." But he did answer: "The one who had mercy on him." And then the last word: "Go and do likewise." It seems to me that Jesus could have put this in the form of another question: "Will you be a neighbor?" For, in the end, Jesus refuses to define who a neighbor is, only what a good neighbor does. He sets no limits and draws no lines because the reach of real love is to go beyond any limit we may want to set or line we may want to draw.

C. As we ponder and pray through this text, one helpful place to put ourselves is in the place of the man who lay half-dead in the road. In that position, we have no hope until Jesus comes along and spends his life to rescue us. That is real love. It is the way of the cross. It reaches out to others in the way Jesus reached out to us. What might love be asking of us? May God give us grace to walk in that way.