

**A Sermon by Rev. Richard D. Clewell**  
**“YOU ASKED FOR IT – LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR –**  
**CAN IT REALLY HAPPEN”**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**July 6, 2008**  
**TEXT: Luke 10:25-37**

The word “love” is a term that is bantered about in our culture – it has come to mean so many different things and often has stressed the benefits of pure pleasure at the expense of relational responsibilities. As human beings we continually put limitations or conditions on the term as Jesus used it in order to protect ourselves from the risks we perceive. Christ’s concept of love both taught and lived out focused on his Father’s love for the entire scope of humanity.

Even with an innate sense of fairness and the desire to treat others as we want to be treated, we seem to have so much difficulty in acknowledging and accepting the love God freely gives to us and even a greater problem in having that love inform our relationships with and actions toward others. Perhaps our dilemma is clearly seen in one child’s letter to God which reads: “Dear God, I bet it’s very hard of you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it. Nan.”

In our familiar Gospel text this morning, Jesus encounters a lawyer who tests Jesus. (Read Luke 10: 25-37). After, Jesus responds to the scribe’s own answer to the test question by affirming his interpretation and telling him to live it. But then comes the much harder question, “And who is my neighbor?” to which Jesus gives this familiar parable. The three men who encounter the mugged traveler all respond to his need in different ways. The priest was very aware of his religious duties and would lose his weekly Temple duty if he touched this near-dead stranger – by ritual law he would have been unclean for seven days. He sees his ceremonial responsibilities more important than the demand to love, his ritual duties above an act of righteousness, being religiously correct as a priority over the pain of this victim.

The Levite also came upon and perhaps considered this wounded one before he passed on by. Perhaps he thought it was too risky – after all this man was a stranger – besides his injuries he looked different and wore unfamiliar clothes. This was a dangerous road and perhaps he was a decoy for further ambush by the robbers that operated here. His motto is “safety first,” take care of “good old number #1.” And so, he passes on by.

The third man, described as a Samaritan, shows compassion toward this beaten individual by responsible action – he cleaned and bandaged his wounds, he placed him on his donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he pays the innkeeper his initial lodging and promises to pay any additional costs when he returns. Because of his responsible actions, the keeper of the inn believes he is a man of his word.

An important part of this story is that to the priest and Levite, this Samaritan would be considered a villain or a heretic, a breaker of ceremonial Law; one who all orthodox

good people despised. The two priests wore phylacteries near their hearts with passages of the Torah (Loving God and loving neighbor). Do we have religious litmus test, to define neighbor or are our actions to any person reflective of the love of God?

Anyway, Jesus asks the self-evident question that the story addresses – “Which of the three was neighbor to this injured man?” Of course, the scribe answers that it was the one who showed mercy. Jesus charges him to go and do likewise.

Now the question becomes what does this story teach us as followers of Jesus Christ? In revealing the love of God as it affects us, Jesus is clear. God’s mercy, grace, and compassion reach out to all who have fallen in their own journey. Christ declared that as the Son of God he came to seek and to save those who are lost or alienated. John Carmody, in his book, *The Quiet Imperative*, writes, “Jesus’ concern is with behavior or practice of the love of God and neighbors which the Torah makes central; behaving as the reality of the kingdom both invites and demands. - - - The Kingdom of God should make it possible for us to see through the walls human beings erect against genuine compassionate action, to break down the barriers by which we would make love and caring neat and undemanding.”

Our God is relational as revealed in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God cares about humanity and as divine love touches us in joy and in suffering we understand God’s presence, compassion and mercy more fully. Our response to that love demands that we behave responsibly to our neighbors whoever they may be, even those we might consider different from ourselves or even more so, to perceived enemies.

In opposition to our human proclivity to erect boundaries, barriers of separation and prejudices directed toward supposedly feeling better about ourselves, Jesus declares that the responsible action to the love of God and the way of the kingdom is how we extend such love to others. To exclude others, to ignore or avoid others, to despise and reject others is to deny God’s love. It leaves one stuck in place and stunts any transformation toward the fullness God desires for each of us. If we choose not to love, we undermine our relational experience of God’s presence and are oblivious to the Spirit’s direction in our faith process.

One of the obvious lessons gleaned from this story is that God as revealed in Christ is not nearly as interested in ritual, ceremony, purity, or perceived righteousness as this One who loves expects the response to divine love to be responsible action which reconciles and heals the broken and disconnected; which seeks to relate and to support the way of the kingdom which restores relationship and peace. The philosopher Francois Fenelon puts it well declaring, “It is not a question of how much we know, how clever we are, not even how good; it all depends on the heart’s love. External actions are the results of love, the fruit it bears; but the source, the root, is deep in the heart.”

Another disclosure in the parable is that God’s love is inclusive, reaching out to all humanity which flies in the face of our tendency to classify, to ostracize, to even dehumanize others so that in some perverse manner we might feel better about ourselves. When we experience and accept divine love, we are affirmed as being valuable to God and

are freed to share such loving assurance with others. This is the action which creates community and the opportunity to share in the compassionate ministry of Jesus Christ.

Finally, God's passionate love informs us about how we are to share that love in a culture and world of power, self-centeredness, and oppression. Even though God is inclusive in loving all his creation, there is divine passion which hates systems that exclude and disenfranchise people. This beloved Lord instructs those who would follow his lead in the book of Micah – "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8) If we love God we are responsible to demonstrate that love in risk and sacrifice to voice our concern for those on the fringes or locked-out of sharing in the relationship and community the Lord desires for all people. It is much easier for us to practice compassion in acts of charity which may well be needed. But in walking with God as full partners, we need in justice to be concerned, to confront and to work for change in the structures of church and society which exclude and deny the worth of all people.

At this point I must say that I am greatly encouraged by the actions of the General Assembly of our denomination this past week. After years of wrangling over the issue of service to God in ordained office by gay or lesbian Christians, they went on record to include those children of God just as previously in our struggles and history we finally included African-Americans and women to full participation in the church. A proposal is being sent to all presbyteries to remove the ordination requirement that would-be ministers, deacons, and elders live "in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness." This must be approved by a majority of the 173 presbyteries in the next year. In addition, the Assembly also voted for Authoritative Interpretation of the Book of Order which takes effect immediately so that those seeking ordination may conscientiously object to the existing standard. Though the battle is not over and some others may leave, there is hope as expressed by the new moderator, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, who stated: "My biggest concern is how does the church move forward? There's great disappointment in some folks and great joy in others, but it really does go back to how do we as a church model for the world a way to live together amid great diversity of opinion?"

Wherever you have a community, you will never have total agreement of opinion nor would you want that. But as a community of Christians, followers of the God who relates in love, we are called to share that love with the world in ways that reconcile and bring liberation to all people.

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, speaks eloquently to the point: "Christian practice is about walking with God, becoming kind, and doing justice. It is not about believing in God and being a good person; it is about how one becomes a good person through the practice of loving God." Harvey Cox, *God's Revolution and Man's Responsibility* clearly adds, "Wherever we are, it is our job to love the world that God loves, to serve it when it despises us, to come back to it and to be with it, to be there as representative of the peace (Shalom) which God is making possible for all people."

Loving God and loving neighbor – can it really happen? You and I are responsible in receiving God’s love and are charged to do so. In so doing we again experience God’s on-going love in new and transforming ways. Thanks be to our God who loves us and continues to give to us and through us.

Amen

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