

“Love First”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 15, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Mark 12:28-31

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Second Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.



Sermon: “Love First”

All of the law and the prophets can be summed up in two words: Love first.

Being a disciple is just that simple, and it’s just that hard. The greatest law is that you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself. What else is there? The law is not that you love with a part of what you are. But that you love with *everything* that you are. There is no question of limits because there are no limits. How far do you go? To the end.

That stands in direct contrast to the world which doesn’t necessarily function that way. The world puts lots of other things first. Be successful first. Do what’s best for you, first. Comfort first. Ease first. Money first. Safety first. Be right first. Win first.

But Jesus says Love First.

I’ll admit that’s a hard thing to do. That’s a tough creed to live by. And it never fails when I preach these kinds of passages that someone comes to me and says “But what about...?” and you can fill in the name of any terrorist or dictator or criminal that’s currently in the news... “Are we supposed to love them, too?”

And the implied answer seems to be “certainly not.” But Jesus never gives an out for evil people or for people you don’t like. He even says that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.¹

19 months ago, Dylan Roof walked into Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC and killed 9 people there. They had been in the middle of their Bible study when he came in and rather than ask him to leave so they could continue, they were open and welcoming to him. They invited him to stay. They showed him love.² One of the great tragedies of that night, for there are many, is that because of what he did, there are people who will now be a little less open, a little less loving, a little less Christ-like.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., a man many see as the architect of the American Civil Rights Movement. One of the things that makes Dr. King such a hero, at least in my eyes, is the fact that he lived in a time when what Mr. Roof did at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC was not all that uncommon. Remember that In 1963, four little African-American girls died when white supremacists set off a bomb in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.³

The murders of people working for equality for African-Americans was unsettlingly common during that period of our nation’s history. Herbert Lee, who worked to help register black voters in Mississippi, was killed by a state legislator who claimed self-defense and was never arrested. Medgar Evers, who directed NAACP operations in Mississippi, was leading a campaign for integration in Jackson when he was shot and killed by a sniper at his home. Ben Chester White, who had worked most of his life as a caretaker on a plantation, and had no involvement in civil rights work, was murdered by Klansmen who thought they could divert attention from a civil rights march by killing a black person. Emmett Till was a black 14 year-old who was tortured and killed by two white men for allegedly whistling at a white girl.⁴ The list goes on. And events like these would have underscored to Dr. King the reality of the people with whom he was dealing and the evil of the forces aligned against him.

Yet in the midst of all that, he taught not hate and fear, but love and compassion.

Last week, my eldest son came home quoting a line I had heard before but I couldn’t quite place it. He kept saying “How long? Not Long.” Turns out his social studies class had been listening to Dr. King’s speech given on the steps of the State Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, after the successful completion of the Selma to Montgomery March on March 25, 1965.⁵ How long until justice would be done and equality realized? Not long.

So I took some time this week and read over the words Dr. King spoke that day. And there is a passage, just before the part Will Grey was quoting where he urges his audience to remain committed to

¹ Matthew 5:44, NRSV

² Drash, Wayne. "Inside Church Massacre..." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 17 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/19/us/inside-charleston-bible-study-massacre/index.html>>.

³ "16th Street Baptist Church Bombing." *NPR*. NPR, 15 Sept. 2003. Web. 19 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1431932>>.

⁴ "Civil Rights Martyrs." *Civil Rights Memorial*. Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2017. <<https://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/civil-rights-memorial/civil-rights-martyrs>>.

⁵ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, Jr. "Our God Is Marching On." Rally at Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March. Alabama State Capitol Steps, Montgomery, AL. 25 Mar. 1965. *Our God Is Marching On! | The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*. Web. 19 Jan. 2017. <<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>>.

nonviolence. He says “Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.”⁶

Martin Luther King wanted to win. Martin Luther King wanted justice. Martin Luther King wanted equality. But those things had to be a product of love. He was courageous. He was a fighter. He was determined. But he was a disciple of Jesus Christ, and that meant love came first. He emphasized that point in his book *Strength to Love*, writing “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”⁷

So someone’s going to say “Are we really expected to love Dylan Roof, Osama Bin Laden, Adolf Hitler? Are we really expected to love these kinds of people? And I say to those people, if you find yourself on a bus sitting next to Dylan Roof, then yes, love him. If you’re waiting in line at the DMV behind Adolf Hitler, then yes, love him, too. If tomorrow you are at the grocery store and you’re reaching for the last can of chick peas at the same time as Osama Bin Laden, then yes, be loving. But really, why start so big? We offer the extreme as a reason to not do the attainable.

Start with loving the people next to you. Start with loving your family, your coworkers, the people in the next booth in the restaurant where you eat lunch today after church. Start with what you can manage and build up from there.

When you learn to drive, you don’t start on the Autobahn. You start making circles in a big, wide open parking lot, with your father in the passenger seat telling you to “Slow down” and work your way up. Loving others is a skill and you have you work at it. You start small. Loving the people who are easy to love and then you work your way up.

When you disagree, make your point, but love first. When something makes you angry, address it, but love first. When you feel like you’re being disrespected, stand up for yourself, but love first.

This is especially important in a climate that seems to have gotten more and more divisive over the years. There are lots of issues that are extremely important to a lot of people. When people start talking about things like guns and abortion and healthcare, they seem to do so with great passion on all sides. But too often our public discourse is filled with hateful rhetoric that reflects a desire to win or to discredit the opposition. And that kind of discourse does not advance us toward a world that reflects God’s desire for us to love one another.

There are issues that are important and over which dedicated people will debate passionately. Should we be more permissive regarding gun laws or more restrictive? Should abortion be banned or should the very difficult decision of whether to end a pregnancy be left to the individual? Should immigrants and refugees be allowed into the United States? Should we have universal health care? Does our constitutional guarantee of equal rights protect members of the LGBTQ and Muslim communities? Do security concerns outweigh our right to privacy?

For all of these issues and many, many more, intelligent, well-meaning people hold beliefs and opinions for which they ardently, fervently believe are right and for which they are willing to fight. But to love first

⁶ King, *Our God Is Marching On!*

⁷ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, Jr.. *Strength to Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. 47. Print.

means that we have to be willing to listen as much as we are willing to talk. We have to be open to being wrong as much as we hope to be right.

And we can't just say, "Well, your opinion is as valid as mine," because factually, not everyone is right. Just because you believe it, does not make it true. But who is right? Whose opinion should direct our practice? How do we know if we don't debate the merits of each position? How do we know if we don't study and critique and discuss? And when the wrong choices are made, how do we right those wrongs?

Remember, the things Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement worked so hard to change: the injustice, the inequality, the evil; they arose within a democracy. They were not *counter* to the will of the people, they were institutionalized by the vote of the majority. Just because a majority votes in favor of a thing, does not make that thing just or right.

So what do we do in the face of evil, and injustice? We resist, we struggle, we raise awareness, we fight. But, we love first. And loving means, as Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians being patient and kind. Love means not being envious, not being boastful, not being arrogant, not being rude. Love means not insisting on getting your own way all the time. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but seeks and honors truth. Perhaps most importantly, love endures.⁸

Imagine how our political discourse would be different; imagine how our recent election campaign would have been different if we chose not "win first," but "love first."

"But Bill," you'll say to me. "That's not how you win an election. That's not how politics works."

Exactly, but it's how the Kingdom of God works.

And I say, that's what's wrong with the world (or at least that's *one* of the things that's wrong with the world) is that we have decided that winning the contest is more important than loving the people with whom we are competing. We've decided that advancing our agendas is more important than loving the people who will be affected by those agendas.

We live in a world that says strength first, power first, privilege first, pride first, victory first. But Jesus said love first. Then let everything else follow from that. And then watch and see how much more the world begins to resemble to Kingdom of God.

Look, this is not some kind of Pollyanna, "Don't worry, be happy," "Love is all you need" kind of theology. Martin Luther King saw too much ugliness and pain and evil in the world for that to be true. When he saw injustice being done, he stood against it. When he saw wrong being done, he spoke out. When he saw the weak being pushed down by the strong, he resisted. But he loved first.

So go and change the world, but before you try to change the world, figure out how to love the world. Go speak truth to power, but before you speak truth to power, figure out how to love those in power. Go forth and embrace the struggle, but before you embrace the struggle, figure out how to love within the struggle. Because that is the greatest law: Love first.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NRSV