

“Love First”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 27, 2019

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.

But the world we live in doesn’t always 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. 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

When Dylan Roof murdered nine people at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, SC three-and-a-half years ago, they had been in the middle of their Bible study. When he came in, they didn't ask him to leave so they could continue; they were open, and they welcomed him in. They invited him to stay. They showed him grace and hospitality and 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 are now a little less open, a little less loving, a little less Christ-like in dealing with strangers. Much of our current national debate about immigration is fueled by this kind of fear of the stranger.

This week we celebrated 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 Dylan Roof did at Emmanuel Church 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 persecution and murder of 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 in his own 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 white 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 A white girl who, some 50 years later admitted for the record, that it never happened. The list goes on. And events like these would have underscored for 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 not fear, but love and compassion.

Will Grey's eighth-grade English class is reading *Warriors Don't Cry*, by Melba Beals.⁵ It's her own story of how she and eight other African-American teens integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. There have been some really good conversations at our house around this book. And I was reminded of a time a few years back when Will Grey came home from school saying over and over, "How long? Not Long." 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 in 1965.⁶ How long until justice would be done, and equality realized? Not long.

There are a lot of good, memorable lines in that speech. One of the best is where he urges his audience to remain committed to nonviolence. He says, "Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding."⁷

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."⁸

So, someone's going to ask, "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 aim so high? Those are extreme examples you will never face. We offer the extreme as a reason to **not** do the mundane.

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 you work your way up. Loving others is a skill and you have to 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. The current debate over funding for walls and a closed government is a great example. 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 which dedicated people will passionately debate. 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 these issues and many, many more - intelligent, well-meaning people hold beliefs and opinions which they ardently, fervently believe are right and for which they are willing to fight. But to love first means that we must be willing to listen as much as we are willing to talk. We must be open to being wrong as much as we hope to be right.

But on the other hand, we can't always 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. And just because a majority supports it does not make it fair. Remember, the things Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement worked so hard to change: the injustice, the inequality, the evil - those things arose *within a democracy*. People voted *for* Jim Crow laws. People voted *in favor* of segregation. People fought a war to *preserve* the abominable practice of slavery. Those things were not *counter* to the will of the people, they *were* the will of the people.

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 just to be clear, loving someone is not the same thing as liking them. Jesus didn't call us to spend long hours over tea or take long walks on the beach together. He called us to love each other. And "loving" someone doesn't always mean "liking" them. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul teaches that love is 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 means that we don't rejoice in wrongdoing but instead that we seek and honor the truth. Perhaps most importantly, love endures.⁹

Imagine how our political discourse would be 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): 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 too often says strength first, money first, privilege first, pride first, victory first. But Jesus said, "Love first" and let everything else follow from that. And when we love first, 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. Today he is sometimes sentimentalized as a big teddy bear who just wanted us all to play fair. Truth is he was a fighter and a radical, and he called out injustice and evil when he saw it. And it made people uncomfortable. And the things he advocated still make people uncomfortable today. But 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 it all grew out of love.

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.

End Notes

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 Beals, Melba. *Warriors Don't Cry: The Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High*. Simon Pulse, 2007.

⁶ 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>>.

⁷ King, *Our God Is Marching On!*

⁸ King, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, Jr.. *Stength to Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. 47. Print.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NRSV