

Love Thy Neighbor, Part 1:  
The Greatest (and Hardest?) Commandment

[Mark 12: 28-34](#)

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It probably goes without saying that preachers all have their own styles of preparing their Sunday sermon. Some preach from a manuscript. Some use notes. Some improvise completely. Some write their sermons on Monday, while others are writing them literally up til the moment worship starts.

I fall somewhere in between on that spectrum. In general, I like to have my sermons done by Friday. Last week was a good week; I thought I had it all wrapped up by Thursday afternoon.

But sometimes the sermon you prepare on Thursday doesn't feel exactly right come Sunday. This is one of those weeks. And so I found myself re-working my words late Saturday night.

What had changed between Thursday and Sunday? Charlottesville, Virginia, of course.

Now, here's the thing. If you were watching me go about my day yesterday, nothing would've indicated a big shift, the kind necessitating a sermon rewrite.

Will and I slept in, and then got up and walked to the farmer's market in Bridge Square. The weather was beautiful. We bought our favorite coffee and our favorite treats and sat by the river, enjoying the mild weather. Then we bought some produce, walked home, did some chores. We took a nap with our elderly cats. Made dinner and watched Netflix.

Throughout it all, we read news headlines and checked Twitter and watched videos of the protests on Facebook. And we lamented and cursed and wondered at the state of the world, and then went about our day.

Then, late last night, I read a post on Facebook by Lisa Moore. Lisa is a professor of social work at St. Olaf and volunteered last year with our Senior High Youth Group, helping to lead our discussion on race and privilege. Lisa's post was a short essay entitled "Reflections of a Black woman in Small Town, USA." With her permission, I'm going to share an excerpt of what she said about being a woman of color in Northfield:

"On a day like today, when I sit in front of my TV watching the violence in Charlottesville, VA, it is lonely. You are acutely aware of the ways you are in white space on a day like today, because nobody mentions it when you go to a store or see people on the street. My partner and I sit in our home

with our outrage, I check on my children, talk to them about what is happening, and I talk to our friends and family from afar.

You think to yourself, “What the hell am I doing here” and then you become indignant about your right to be here. The right of your children to have space to run and experience what it is like to play in a wide-open space. You are pissed that the simplicity of living, if one is not blessed with wealth or access to family being close by, has become what feels like the exclusive domain of whiteness... People don’t witness suffering in this space without looking for it and to be clear, suffering abounds, but you wouldn’t know it when you walk down the street or drive around the town, unless you know where to look.”

I’m not reading Lisa’s words to make us feel guilty, or inadequate, or defensive, although we may feel some of those emotions as we hear them. I certainly cycled through a few, myself. At the risk of putting words in Lisa’s mouth, I don’t think her intention is to shame anyone. She’s simply telling it like it is. She’s naming a reality, understanding that many of her white neighbors experience the same town very differently. I want us, a mostly white church, to rest in this dissonance for a moment.

I feel like there are multiple, dissonant realities playing out all over America right now. And to some extent, that’s totally normal. We are a huge, diverse country. Of course there are different points of view, different opinions,

different sides to many issues. Of course. That's a perfectly healthy feature of a functioning republic.

What isn't healthy is how certain extremist points of view—views that many of us thought were fringe in this day and age, views that openly dehumanize others—are claiming legitimacy and power in the public square. I remember when the Klu Klux Klan did a small march through my New England town in the early 90s. I remember seeing them; a small group of mild-mannered-looking men. I remember thinking they looked a bit pathetic.

That was nothing compared to the hundreds who proudly gathered in Charlottesville this weekend with torches and Nazi slogans, leaving violence and terror and death in their wake.

Lately, it feels like we've been at sea. Lately, it feels like the waves are crashing around us, and there's this big storm building. I think some people—especially people on the margins, people of all color, queer people—have known about this storm for a long, long time. But now, no matter who you are or where you live, it's hard to deny the unrest. The tension. The pain.

I invite you to look at our bulletin cover, which features words by Warsan Shire, a Somali-British poet who writes about immigration, love, war, womanhood, and living in the African Diaspora. Shire's words capture

something so real, so truthful about living in this moment in history, if we are open to seeing it.

*I held an atlas in my lap*

*Ran my fingers across the whole world*

*And whispered*

*Where does it hurt?*

*It answered*

*everywhere*

*everywhere*

*Everywhere.*

So what would Jesus do?

There are so many answers to that question, but I want to focus on one thing he does that we saw in today's reading. (You knew I'd get to it eventually.) You see, Jesus did so many big impressive things—miracles, healings, resurrection—that sometimes it's easy to miss the smaller actions, the ones that are actually more within our everyday grasp.

One of Jesus' less flashy actions is that he is constantly returning to the Hebrew scriptures. He is constantly going back to the well of his sacred tradition, as if to say, the answers are here. You just have to look again.

So when the scribe asks Jesus to name the greatest commandment, Jesus doesn't try to impress everyone with something new; he doesn't try to reinvent the wheel. No, Jesus goes straight to the heart of Jewish law. Like any good rabbi, he has the ancient wisdom of God right at his fingertips, and he paraphrases Deuteronomy and Leviticus into this short, beautiful lesson:

“You 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”; and, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It seems so simple. But it's not. If it were that simple, the world would look very different.

As I turned the phrase over in my head this week, I found myself wondering if this is because the commandment isn't just to “love your neighbor” in a vague, open-ended, outward-facing way.

No, the commandment is to “love your neighbor *as you love yourself*.”

*As you love yourself.*

*As you love yourself.*

You might be thinking, “Well, what’s so complicated about that? It’s the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have done unto you. We learn this in kindergarten. Duh.”

Except... now that I think about it, I don’t know that many people who are actually that good at loving themselves. Now, I don’t mean “loving oneself” in a narcissistic or self-aggrandizing way. We all know someone who is like that.

I mean a different kind of self-regard. A self-regard rooted *not* in “I’m so great,” or “I’m so beautiful,” or “Other people want what I have.”

I’m talking about a self-regard rooted in God.

I invite you to just imagine something with me. Imagine taking God’s love for granted. Imagine resting in a deep assurance that God is with you no matter what: no matter what you do, no matter what you look like, no matter your mistakes, no matter your darkest secrets, no matter if you succeed or fail, no matter if you live or die. Imagine being convinced, every second of every day, that you are God’s beloved and God is well-pleased with you.

Just think what you could do if you really trusted in that. Not just some of the time. Most of the time. Even all of the time.

Imagine the risks you take. Imagine the hard truths you could hear and receive with grace. Imagine the self-imposed limits you could cross. Imagine the paralysis you could shake off, the actions you could embody. Imagine the energy you have for loving others, if you didn't have to work so hard at loving yourself.

I'm convinced that we can't *begin* to embody the outward part of the greatest commandment if we don't simultaneously work on that inward part. We can't love our neighbor, *really love them* in a way that makes a difference, if we don't have clarity, a moral courage that only comes with deep conviction and a grounded sense of self.

I was talking recently to my mom and her friend Tom about sailing, and I was introduced to a term called reefing. Reefing, apparently, is when the sailor reduces the area of sail exposed to the wind, by folding or rolling the canvas in and on itself. This is a speed and safety measure. It helps keep the boat "on its feet" so it won't tip over in rough weather.

To extend the metaphor further, if you reef your sails and the conditions are very bad, the next step is to find a harbor, a safe harbor, a place to rest. And to rest, you need a mooring. A mooring, I learned, is a permanent structure to which a vessel may be secured. It's more secure than dropping anchor.

We need both of those skills right now, in a spiritual sense. We need to reef our sails and find a place to moor, so that we don't sink, so that we aren't swallowed up by sins of racism and white supremacy and anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

What is your mooring? What is it that gives you courage and clarity?

My mooring is, and always be will, this: the promise that I am God's beloved.

I am God's beloved. You are God's beloved. We are God's beloved.  
Love you neighbor as you love yourself. Love yourself as God loves you.  
Love your neighbor as God loves you.

It is especially important to remember this ethic right now, when our institutions and our governments and our mass communications are in the grip of such chaos. As the threats intensify, so must our love.

So, church: let's work on being a community where we practice loving self-regard moored in God. Let's think of this place as a homecoming, a harbor we can return to, week after week, to remember *who we are* and *whose we are*.

We are not a perfect church. We are a human church. We have our limits, our privileged blind spots, our sacred cows that get in our way and get between us and God.

But this is also place where we can return to our sacred tradition, just like Jesus did in today's story.

This is a place we can hear words that have endured, and we can be steadied by them. This is a place where, at our best, we can love each other well, so that we have the moral courage we need to love our neighbor well, whether they are here in Northfield or in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Let's love bear us, so that we can bear love,  
*everywhere*  
*everywhere*  
*everywhere.*

Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

### SILENCE

Breath prayer:

*Breathe in love*

*Breathe out love*

Gracious God,

We want to love you,

with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.

What you have shown us,

Help us to show the world.

We pray today for the earth, so vast, so powerful, yet so fragile,

So vulnerable to the marks of human greed and consumption.

*Help us to love our planet with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.*

We pray for activists and protestors and peacemakers,

From Charlottesville to Venezuela,

in places famous and obscure,

working so hard to right wrongs,

Resisting the sins of racism and white supremacy and economic oppression.

*Help us to love justice with all our heart, all, and all our strength.*

We pray today for the nations, the leaders,

The ones in power, that they will resist the siren call of war,

And protect their people from violence and destruction.

*Help us to love peace with all our heart, all, and all our strength.*

We pray today for the homeless and the hungry,  
For the refugee and and the prisoner,  
those who find themselves beyond borders,  
*Help us to love mercy with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.*

We pray today for everyday people in all walks of life,  
For families by blood and families of choice,  
For human beings all kinds of bodies  
and all kinds of abilities  
and all kinds of beliefs,  
Sometimes failing,  
Sometimes thriving,  
Striving to do our best with what we have.  
*Help us to love this life with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.*

Our prayer today is for the ones in our hearts  
those whom we worry about, those whom we miss,  
those whom we know carry heavy burdens.  
*In silence*, let us offer the quiet prayers of our hearts.

O God, receive all this in your embrace, which is wide enough and strong  
enough for all of us. And hear us now as we pray the prayer that Jesus  
taught to us, a prayer that he embodied with his own life:

Our God, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily  
bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not  
into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the  
power, and the glory, forever.  
AMEN.