

“Love Those Who Are Other”

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In the midst of this cold, snowy weekend we are celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. It's a three-day weekend for us. In my family, we are celebrating that, in part, by spending time together, and the kids are enjoying having time away from school. Yesterday, in the snow storm, we were beginning a Star Wars marathon. [Laughter.] It turns out the snow storm wasn't quite as grand as the weather predictors might have suggested.

But, this weekend we celebrate and we look tomorrow to recognize Martin Luther King, Jr. who, for me personally, has been a figure of great inspiration — someone who has challenged me, someone who has moved me. I remember the last time I was in Washington, DC, and brought my kids, one of the things I looked forward to was taking them to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. It's a great memorial of stone and this figure looking out past.

I am moved by the statements throughout his life that he made; and, I am moved by the beloved community that he sought and the methods which he sought to create that community — methods of standing up against injustice; standing up against evil through love, with the intent that he would win over those who are opposed to them, and they would become brothers and sisters in Christ.

It doesn't take much time to see that we have not achieved the beloved community of Martin Luther King's dream. Thinking of Washington, DC, it is not hard for us to see the ways that we break apart into groups that stand against one another. Present in the news and in our minds might be the shutdown of our government. It has been a source of conflict that plays out on nearly a daily basis.

Yesterday I was moved, in particular, by a video that was actually not part of the conflict of our government, but rather a story that played out among teenagers and a Native American. Some of you may have seen this. It's setting the internet on fire.

At the initial presentation of it (I share with you, up front, that there is an alternate view that changed how I perceived this), but, at the initial presentation of it, we see a young boy, 16 years old, in a political hat from the last campaign, standing very close to a Native American who was drumming — who we have had the opportunity to hear that he was a Vietnam War veteran — and is there celebrating. And, around him are these other boys, and it appears almost like a mob. They appear to be mocking him and it is *painful* to watch. Like I said, the internet has been set afire at what appears to be this act of disrespect and mockery, from one group to another.

I extend that to say that, after this broke through the Twitter-sphere, some of the kids who were there wrote to some of the media, asking that they would understand that there was more to this story — that they had other video that changed the context.

It appeared from the first video that these boys had kind of entered into and surrounded these Native Americans who were demonstrating; and the second video seemed to suggest

that a handful of Native American demonstrators actually walked into this group of high school students, who were raucously and joyously cheering a school cheer, and that this drummer kind of walked right up to this young boy.

We see two stories happen here. The first story seems to suggest a terrible injustice from one side. And the second story, if true, seems to suggest an equally or worse injustice that these children were framed — essentially maligned — and open to an internet mob mentality. It is a difficult and terrible scene and we don't yet know how this will play out, but it illustrates just another element of the brokenness of our world; that we are so far from the beloved community that Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of.

We so easily break into “us and them,” and seeming slights are fanned into flames, and break us apart in animosity toward one another.

In this context of our broken world, we come for this Scripture. A lawyer was coming to test Jesus. There is not a lot of description as to what it means that he was trying to test Jesus. It just appears that they were challenging his teaching, that they were seeking to push him, because he seemed to be teaching beyond their teaching of the law.

So, they were asking him questions that might encourage him to trip himself up, to get out over his skis, and say something that was clearly over and against the law. And so, he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus didn't spend much time with this question. He just tossed it back to him and said, “What do you read of Scripture? What does the law tell you? What is your reading?”

And the lawyer responded with the Shema, the common Hebrew prayer that was prayed nearly every morning: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and, in addition, love your neighbor as yourself.” A simple summation of the law: Love God and love those near you. And Jesus said, “That's true. You have it right. Go and do that.”

Now, I am a student of John Calvin, not that I am fully a disciple of John Calvin — but I am instructed by him, and I have in my office a set of John Calvin's commentaries. He is someone I consult with occasionally, because I am interested in how he interprets this. And John Calvin, you may know, was very concerned with the question of salvation, and with our inability of our own doing to achieve salvation. So, he went to great lengths in this moment to say, “Jesus is affirming these are the rules. These are the laws. This is what is required of them, but none of us are capable of it. But, Jesus is not saying, ‘Yes. Go and do this and you will receive eternal life.’ Rather, he is saying, ‘That is true. You are reading the law correctly.’ However, none of us are good enough of our own accord — only through Jesus Christ and Jesus' righteousness are we saved.”

But the lawyer wasn't satisfied with that. Some scholars suggest that perhaps the lawyer was frustrated that his challenge was so easily dismissed and wanted to push further, and so he pushed on, “Who is mighty?”

What was he asking? It says he wanted to “justify” himself. Maybe he wanted to be able to brag, that if he was good enough that he was going to inherit eternal life. We don't know what was inside his mind, but Jesus turned this question upside down. He asked this

question, “Who is the bound of my neighbor? How far out in distance do I have to go? Who am I obligated to help?”

The Old Testament law taught that the Jews were obligated to help one another – fellow Jews – and to show mercy upon the resident aliens — the aliens who were not Jewish or living amidst them. Was that the extent of it, or was there more?

And Jesus instead told a story. I like stories. I like the benefit of it. I was drawn in by Miles, my son — my youngest of four, the other day. He was thrilled with these myths — the Greek myths — that he was looking at Ted Education for teaching of the Greek Myths. So he was looking at the story of Daedalus, who was trying to become a god, essentially. He was pushing the bounds of human knowledge. And, by these myths, they were describing the central challenges of human nature in our society.

Jesus wasn't telling a story here to explain to us; rather he was telling the story that breaks all of our understanding, all that is natural to us. He turned it on its head. “Who is my neighbor? Who must I help?”

He tells a story of a priest coming by and looking the other way – a Levite coming by and looking the other way. In the rule of threes (it seems he could be setting up a joke), [laughter] or, more concisely, he is drawing our attention to this third person. What is it going to be? What is going to happen?

The story seems difficult. It sounds as though this poor traveler is doomed. He is on a road where no one might come by for days, and he is half dead. Then Jesus brings a Samaritan by and I imagine the listeners are not hopeful that this is going to result in this traveler's life being saved. But the Samaritan that Jesus described, saw him and was moved with compassion, and had mercy on him.

Last week, Pastor Scott was outlining the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans, and it's not a well-known history, but it is clear and it is evident in the story, and in the stories when Jesus is interacting with the Samaritans, who were very difficult in the relationship with one another. Not long before this, a group of Samaritans had spread the bones of dead people in the Temple, which defiled it. [Under] the Jewish law, death was unclean, so there was this great source of animosity between them. They did not appreciate one another. They were very much “us and them.”

But the Samaritan had mercy. And then Jesus asked, “Who was the neighbor to him?” And, the lawyer said, “The one who showed mercy.” And Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise.”

Where are the bounds of those who need the love? Is it our family? Is it our neighbors? What does it mean? Is it those in our community? Is it those in our country? Those of our same race? We so naturally fall into groups and love those or have empathy for and rally together with people who are like us. And Jesus is turning it back on its head. Instead the Samaritan is not one who had any sense of identity with this traveler. If they had met in an inn, they likely wouldn't have even looked at each other, let alone speak. But the Samaritan was moved by compassion. He saw in the broken humanity lying on the road a human being, someone in need, and was moved. Jesus said, “Go, and do likewise.”

A great deal of the difficulty in our world — some of the things that have pained me the most about our history — have come out of our ability to separate ourselves as human beings from one another and reduce those who are “other” to less than human; something that we could slaughter without concern; something that we could imprison without concern; or, put into concentration camps without concern.

But Jesus pushes us to look to the world as God sees it. I asked Laura to create a bulletin cover that described this, or pictorially represented this. We break into “us and them,” but God’s hands hold us all. There is no distinction for God between “us and them” — between “us and the others.” For God, those who we consider “other” are those whom God loves.

As we read earlier in Genesis, each person — humanity — was created bearing the image of God; and each person – the billions around the planet – whether they be related to us whether they share an ethnic or a traditional identity with us, each of them are the image of God, and we can be, and are called to be, moved compassionately, when we see any of God’s creation in need.

Amen.