

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, October 8, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: 1 Peter 1:13-25

Theme: Love Where You Live: Love Your Neighbor

[prayer]

Jesus has commanded us: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matt 22:39 CEB). On Friday, I broke this commandment. I was picking up dinner at a popular restaurant near where I live. As I was returning to my car, a young man approached me. In a soft voice he started to ask me for help. But before he could finish, I put up my hand, shook my head, and said, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you.” Then I got into my car. I watched him approach several other people without success before I drove away.

Now, I can make all kinds of excuses for my behavior. I can say that this man startled me – *which he did* – and I felt unsafe. I can say that I was having a bad day – *which I was* – and my spirit was too tender and exhausted to help anyone but myself. I can say that panhandling puts generous people in an uncomfortable position. I can say that if I gave him the twenty-dollar bill in my wallet, I had no guarantee how he would spend it, and there are perhaps better ways of helping the homeless. I can even say that the world’s suffering is vast, and I can’t possibly be expected to address it all.

None of these excuses are untrue. And yet, Jesus did not qualify his command to love our neighbors with any of these truths. There I was, standing next to my car with a burrito in my hand after spending money at the hair salon, and what did I say to this man? “I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

It was a lie. I am shocked at how easily it sprung to my lips. But here was the real sin I committed: I didn’t even grant him the dignity of telling me what he needed. I assumed, and then I acted from my assumption. The wounded look on his face was proof of the immediate harm I caused.

I do not always act this way toward surprise requests for help. But I was reminded Friday that compassion is not a habit; it is a choice and a discipline. Some other famous words of Jesus leap to mind: “What you have done for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done for me” (Matt 25:40 paraphrased). As I drove home, the man’s face morphed into the face of Christ, and I was filled with shame and sadness.

I make this confession to you to illustrate that every day we are presented with opportunities to love people. In our human weakness, sometimes these opportunities outstretch our desire or ability. I am confident that every one of you can think of a recent experience where you failed to love a neighbor right in front of you. I want to normalize talking about those experiences in our church. This work of love is not easy. Jesus has called us into covenant community because he knows the obstacles we face in loving God and our neighbors. We should talk about these challenges so we can support each other in being followers of Jesus.

Peter writes in his letter to the Christians in Asia Minor, “Love each other deeply and earnestly” (v. 22 CEB). Let’s review the context of this letter: These Christians were a minority population who were sometimes persecuted by their pagan neighbors. Peter calls them ‘exiles’ or ‘strangers’ because of their sense of alienation from the surrounding culture. But he is clear that their exile is not without a purpose – God had planted them in Asia Minor to be a witness to the Gospel right where they were.

The trouble is that they were getting tired and discouraged. Maybe you can relate? Sometimes it feels like it takes supernatural strength to follow Jesus and love our neighbors. And the truth is, it does take supernatural strength! We mistakenly think this strength comes from inside us. But Peter reminds us that this strength comes from *beyond* us – from the salvation we have received in Jesus. In his death and resurrection, Jesus overcame the powers of sin and darkness. And he has promised that one day he will return, and his victory will be made complete when God establishes the kingdom of heaven on earth.

In the meantime, Peter exhorts us to “Place [our] hope completely on the grace that will be brought to [us] when Jesus Christ is revealed” (v. 13). This hope in God’s promised future – in God’s neighborhood where neighbors will live in

harmony with each other – gives us inspiration and strength to love our neighbors in the less-than-harmonious present.

So often our hope is disappointed because we put it in something other than the promises of God. The Christians in Asia Minor were doing just that – hoping that the local politics would change, hoping that their neighbors would behave differently toward them. These were not bad things to hope for, but they were possibilities, not certainties.

To avoid discouragement, Peter counsels them to distinguish between what is perishable and imperishable. Through Jesus, we have been given “new birth – not from the type of seed that decays but from seed that doesn’t. This seed is God’s life-giving and enduring word” (v. 23). The word is Jesus. Those who set their hearts on the perishable will perish, but those who set their hearts on Jesus and seek to follow his Way will endure to eternity.

In the mid-1990’s, author and public education activist Jonathan Kozol published a book called *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. Kozol quotes a newspaper columnist who had given up on hope in God. She wrote,

*“Out there, someone is sleeping on a grate...and the emergency rooms are full of people...Cruelty is as natural to the city as fresh air is to the country...I used to feel this cruelty was wrong, immoral...Now I don’t know. Maybe it’s the fuel that powers the palace.”*

It is tempting to accept cruelty as the norm. Maybe we sigh and shake our heads in sadness, but do we believe that God has and will overcome this cruelty? And if we have this hope, how does it change our attitudes? After quoting the cynical journalist, Kozol quotes a boy named Anthony who was living in poverty. Anthony aspired to be a writer. He wrote about his hope for God’s kingdom come:

*“God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have arrived.  
“People shall come hand-in-hand...  
“God will be fond of you.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* [New York: Crown, 1995] 113-14 & 237-38.

Faith sustains our relationship to God in the present but hope claims and acts upon God's promises for the future. What distinguishes Christian hope from everyday hopes is that Christian hope *is* a certainty. It is a certainty in God's presence, in God's kingdom, in God's fondness for His people. We worship a God whose *hesed*, whose steadfast lovingkindness has never failed us. This love was so steadfast that it died on a cross and then rose from the dead. Jesus is therefore a reliable place to put our hope. This hope is not Pollyannaish. It is based on our sober-minded study of Scripture, our attention to the traditions and disciplines of our faith, and the wisdom we receive in community with God and each other.

Peter exhorts us to make our minds ready for action – the Greek is literally to *gird up the loins of our minds*, to *tuck our minds in* like the ancient Hebrews tucked their cloaks into their belts before they set out from Egypt. Faith and hope are disciplines (v. 13). Even though we have been saved from sin, the deep and earnest love that God commands us to have for each other does not happen passively. We develop this love through a disciplined commitment to learning the Way of Jesus by wrestling with Scripture, seeking wisdom in prayer, doing good deeds as often as we can – and yes, confessing and seeking forgiveness when we get it wrong.

And we will get it wrong, just as I did on Friday. Leviticus teaches that a holy God requires a holy people, but we frequently fall short of this holy standard. Which is why we give thanks that it is Christ's righteousness that stands in our place before the judgment seat of God. When Peter tells us to be holy (v. 16; cf. Lev. 19:2), he is not commanding us to be perfect. He is commanding us to imitate Jesus. And how did Jesus practice holiness? Not by exercising judgment, even though as God he held that right. Jesus practiced holiness by being merciful, compassionate, and servant-hearted in love.

When Peter writes, "Love each other deeply and earnestly," the Greek is "*Agape* each other." Agape is a selfless love that finds fulfillment in lifting others up. This is the love that God demonstrated for us in Jesus Christ, a love so pure and selfless Peter likens it to a "flawless, spotless lamb" (v. 19). He is referencing the sacrificial rites in Leviticus, where a lamb was offered as an atoning sacrifice to God for the sins of Israel.

The blood of Jesus has accomplished the same atonement for us. We have been set free from the shame of our sin. The freedom that we find in God's forgiveness keeps us from getting discouraged when loving our neighbors proves difficult and we mess it up. The knowledge of our salvation and hope in God's kingdom empowers us to go into the world and love our neighbors by lifting them up.

John Wesley taught that we demonstrate holiness through works of piety and works of mercy. Both are an obedient and reverent response to the inner transformation that God's grace works upon our hearts and minds when we are given new birth in Jesus. This transformation does not happen by our own power; it happens by the power of God. But we can cooperate with God in this transformation by practicing piety and mercy. Examples of piety are prayer, meditating on Scripture, fasting, worship, and receiving communion. These works can be personal or done in community with other Christians. Examples of works of mercy are acts of compassion and justice – anything that addresses the needs of another person. Again, these works can be done as individuals or in community. Together, piety and mercy combine to cultivate personal and social holiness. And holiness has a single end: The work of love. We are encouraged to be disciplined in our works of piety and mercy so that we can strengthen our capacity to love our neighbor. Our obedience to God is measured by our love for one another.

The Holy Spirit was quick to convict me of sinning against my neighbor. As I prayed through my shame and sadness, she presented some options for penance. I am now resolved that anytime I pass a panhandler by, I will donate to a charity in my community that serves the homeless. I do not share this resolve to make a show of piety, but to demonstrate how obedience to the Way of Jesus opens the door to change. When we know better, we resolve to do better; this is the work of transformation in holiness.

To love earnestly is to set aside our excuses, no matter how justified they may be, and let the pure heart of Christ radiate through us. Radiate has an intensity to it, like waves of heat rolling out from a bonfire. But this is exactly the kind of love Peter exhorts us to have – deep love, earnest love, intense love – *ektenos* love, which is love that is stretched out.

So let our *agape* be *ektenos*. Let our love stretch and stretch and stretch.

Amen.