

## **Sermon ~ June 28, 2020**

### **What's This Love Thing All About**

#### **Old Testament Scripture**

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Leviticus 19:18

#### **Scripture introduction:**

The first Old Testament reading we heard today is called the Shema by the Jewish people. Every Jewish person learns this by heart. It was probably one of the first verses Jesus ever learned. The words of the Shema are inscribed on small scrolls that are contained in a box called a mezuzah that is then fastened to the doorpost of Jewish homes.

The second Old Testament reading we heard today comes from Leviticus. It and the Shema are two of the 613 laws of the Jewish people.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus is asked what of all these 613 commandments are the most important. In both Matthew and Mark Jesus answers the question with what we now call the Great Commandment. But in Luke, Jesus, in good Jewish fashion, answers the question with a question back to the questioner. After then Jesus follows up with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The gospel of John does not record the Great Commandment. In John Jesus gives an even straighter answer. Hear now our New Testament readings.

#### **Luke 10:25-29, 36-37**

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

*And then Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan....ending with....*

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

#### **John 15:12**

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

## Sermon

In a church after-school program I was once a part of we had just sung one of our songs and his little guy about six years old, who had never been a part of a church group before, pipes up and says “Love, love, love! What’s this love thing all about?!”

Out of the mouths of babes ~ what, indeed, is this love thing all about. So the winter of that year we devoted our church school teaching to “What’s this love thing all about?!” We looked at the Good Samaritan and how Jesus told us to love our neighbors.

We looked at I Corinthians 13, which tells us how love acts. We looked at I John where we are told that each of us is a loved child of God. And we looked at the gospel of John where Jesus says, more than once, a new commandment I give you that you love one another.

But there was more to “what is this love thing all about”. The children in that church that year went to a local grocery store and did the shopping themselves for the food that they then delivered to the local Food Bank. They put love into action for people they may never know. The children also made and sent valentines for the senior citizens in the congregation ~ putting love into action.

What’s this love thing all about? ***It is the absolute heart of who Jesus was, what he taught, and what he expects from each of us.***

In just chapters 13 – 15 in the gospel of John ~ Jesus, in what is seen as his final words to his disciples ~ mentions love something like twenty-three times.

We have John 13:34 “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*”

In John 14:15 Jesus says “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” And that is repeated again twice more in chapter 14.

Then we come to chapter 15 and the verse we heard today: “*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*”

And let us not forget what Jesus said was the greatest commandment ~ to love God, to love others, and to love ourselves.

I’ve had folks sometimes say they get tired of hearing about love. I’m sorry, but that is what Jesus was constantly talking about. And certainly his was the agape love ~ that is an unconditional love that *wants only the best for each person.*

So, how do we live love? How do we live this way that Jesus is telling his disciples to do? How do we really get down to the core of Jesus’ teaching in all these love statements?

Now, I admit to you. I've known for a month and a half that I would be doing the sermon on this Sunday, June 28. And I had pretty much in mind what I wanted to say. Then May 25<sup>th</sup> happened ~ and the murder of George Floyd.

Racism ~ that has been a part of our country since before its beginning, for over 400 years ~ has finally been exposed in such a way that it cannot be ignored any longer. And along with that white privilege are finally words that white people are actually saying ~ and beginning ~ trying ~ to get an understanding of just what it means.

So I found myself looking again at the great commandment of Jesus. Love God ~ and love your neighbor as yourself. Over the years I have done a lot of thinking and talking about what it means to love my neighbor. The Good Samaritan story gives us an outstanding example ~ as well as very difficult one ~ of just how loving our neighbor is lived out.

But I've really not given much time or thought as to what *loving myself really means*.

Now it can certainly mean not putting myself down. When I used to lead a lot of camps and retreats as we were in a circle getting to know each other I would ask folks to ~ tell three good things about themselves. You would be amazed at how people really struggled with verbalizing good things about themselves.

We have been taught not to brag or say anything good about ourselves ~ and thus have not even acknowledged things we should celebrate about ourselves. Acknowledging good things about ourselves can be an act of loving ourselves.

Loving ourselves can also mean making sure I take care of myself. I think most of us have heard that if we don't take care of ourselves we will not be much good to others ~ especially if we wear ourselves out or make ourselves sick.

These are some of the things I've thought about when I ever did think about loving myself. But now as we are beginning to come out of isolation imposed by the coronavirus pandemic ~ I find myself confronted by the pandemic of racism with white privilege. And I have found myself thinking: Is confronting the inherent white privilege ~ that I as a white woman have no choice but to be a part of ~ is confronting and understanding this in myself loving myself?

Over this past month I have come to believe it is. On Sunday mornings, in addition to listening to our own St. Helens worship services, Dick and I have also developed a routine of being *in worship* by attending at least two to three other church services on-line. We laugh and say we have now been in church far longer each Sunday than if we had been in a physical setting of worship.

It was on one Sunday that Adam Hamilton, who is the senior pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in the Kansas City area, said something that really connected for me.

I have always known and preached that repentance means to turn around ~ or to change. What he said was so simple. Repent begins with a change of mind ~ that leads to a change of heart ~ that leads to a change in actions. And he said this in talking about white privilege.

***Repent begins with a change of mind ~ that leads to a change of heart ~ that leads to a change in actions.***

Does loving myself mean educating my mind ~ changing my mind ~ thus allowing myself to more fully understand what white privilege means? And thereby helping me to love my neighbors in ways that have never occurred to me?

I would like to share with you what Shola M Richards, a black man, wrote in a blog on May 28<sup>th</sup>:

*Twice a day, I walk my dog Ace around my neighborhood with one, or both, of my girls. I know that doesn't seem noteworthy, but here's something that I must admit: I would be scared to death to take these walks without my girls and my dog. In fact, in the four years living in my house, I have never taken a walk around my neighborhood alone (and probably never will).*

*Sure, some of you may read that and think that I'm being melodramatic or that I'm "playing the race card" (I still have no clue what the hell means), but this is my reality.*

*When I'm walking down the street holding my young daughter's hand and walking my sweet fluffy dog, I'm just a loving dad and pet owner taking a break from the joylessness of crisis homeschooling.*

*But without them by my side, almost instantly, I morph into a threat in the eyes of some white folks. Instead of being a loving dad to two little girls, unfortunately, all that some people can see is a 6'2" athletically-built black man in a cloth mask who is walking around in a place where he doesn't belong (even though, I'm still the same guy who just wants to take a walk through his neighborhood).*

*It's equal parts exhausting and depressing to feel like I can't walk around outside alone, for fear of being targeted.*

*If you're surprised by this, don't be. We live in a world where there is a sizable amount of people who actually believe that racism isn't a thing, and that White Privilege is a made-up fantasy to be politically-correct.*

*Yes, even despite George Floyd, Christian Cooper, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor (and countless other examples before them, and many to come afterward), some people still don't think it is true, let me share some common sense points:*

Today I share with you just his first point.

Mr. Richards said: *Having white privilege doesn't mean that your life isn't difficult, it simply means that your skin color isn't one of the things contributing to your life difficulties.*

*Case in point, if it never crossed your mind that you could have the cops called on you (or worse, killed) for simply bird watching then know that is a privilege that many black/brown people (myself included) don't currently enjoy.*

I fully admit ~ this is a learning curve for me. Things I don't even think about are sometimes a matter of life and death to people of color. It now makes me wonder if this has contributed to my bi-racial grandson ~ raised in a white family ~ of his not wanting to get his driver's license.

And so I ask myself again ~ *is part of loving myself educating my mind to what people of color experience daily?*

What they experience is very real! I don't need to feel guilty about it ~ but I do have to acknowledge it is real. In knowing it is very real for people of color ~ I can then change my heart ~ and in doing so I change my actions.

And in changing of my actions I can love my neighbor more fully by seeking justice, and offering care and compassion in ways I may never have imagined.

Loving is tough work! And we know that loving takes so many different forms. When thinking about loving in relation to white privilege loving can mean speaking up when a racist joke is told ~ or other hurtful remarks are made. Speaking up when perhaps your circle of friends that you are with may not approve or like what you say. Loving can be hard work!

But the bottom line is Jesus did not suggest that we love one another; he did not recommend that we love one another ~ he commanded that we love one another and that we love ourselves ~ as he loved us.

As I think about the racism I find myself wanting to educate myself. I have discovered so many very good resources. Just Googling ~ United Methodist racism resources ~ has yielded so many possibilities ~ including the video of Robin DiAngelo called *Deconstructing White Privilege*. It is one of the most helpful video's I've ever watched.

And interestingly enough Phil Vischer ~ who is the creator of Veggie Tales and the voice of Bob the Tomato ~ has an excellent short video called *Race in America*. For years I used Veggie Tales in exploring Biblical stories with children. In his video, *Race in America*, in 15 minutes he outlines much of how we got to where we are today.

The resources to educate ourselves are available.

In Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*, our Luke passage reads like this: *Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. "Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" Jesus answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?"*

*The man said: "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself." "Good answer!" said Jesus. "Do it and you'll live."*

I am coming to understand that that little part of *loving myself* ~ that I've so often just glossed over ~ is actually quite important if it includes educating my mind ~ that then changes my heart ~ and leads to changes in my actions of loving others.

So how are you ~ how am I ~ loving myself in such a way that it leads to better loving my neighbor?

Hear now these words from the apostle Paul ~ words he so long ago wrote to folks living in Corinth ~ words to us today.

Though I may speak with bravest fire,  
and have the gift to all inspire,  
and have not love;  
my words are vain;  
as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,  
and striving so my love profess,  
but not be giv'n  
by love within,  
the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control,  
our spirits long to be made whole.  
Let inward love  
guide every deed;  
by this we worship, and are freed.

Amen