

September 27, 2020

“Love One Another”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Various verses from 1 John

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Last Sunday evening I watched a portion of a PBS miniseries entitled “The War.” It's the story of the Second World War as told through the personal accounts of a handful of men and women who experienced that war firsthand. What particularly intrigued me, and in fact is the impetus behind my sermon today, is one unusual incident that happened during the Battle of the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge is considered one of the costliest ever fought by the U.S. Army, because we suffered over one hundred thousand casualties!

Now the incident I'm about to describe appears incredibly paradoxical given what's happening today in our country. One of the tactics the Germans employed in trying to defeat us was to air drop German paratroopers behind the American lines, with the Germans dressed in American uniforms. The objective was to cause panic by creating confusion within the ranks of the Americans as to who was and who wasn't the enemy, with the result that the American soldiers could end up shooting at one another. So identifying who was and who wasn't an American became a priority. But here's the foil: the Germans didn't have any people of color as soldiers! So identifying a black soldier was just a mere formality – he was obviously an American. As one black soldier, Ollie Stewart, commented, “I was halted many times, but my face was my best identification.” Or another way of stating it, “My face was my best protection from being shot and killed by another American.” Now what I found ironic was that during the Battle of the Bulge, a black face was actually an asset. Yet, today, three quarters of a century later, an entire protest movement has formed because of the way a black face, a black person, is perceived by many in our society. The issue of racism has come to the forefront of our daily lives, through the news, television, sports, and more, and has created chaos in our streets. Why? Well, obviously blacks don't want to be the target of racism, and no white person wants to be accused of being racist. And all the emotions and grievances of the past, and now the present, have created divisions among us.

Yet racism is only one of the issues that separate us. Politics is another. Democrats and Republicans are divided on just about everything. There's no agreement on a new pandemic stimulus, there's the dirty infighting about a new Supreme Court Justice, and with the election only thirty-seven days away, all the political rhetoric is heating up. Now, I can sense some of you are getting a little anxious, asking

yourself, “Where is she going with this? I don’t want to hear all this at church.” Well, to be honest, I don’t either! But as Christians, our faith needs to shape our thoughts and attitudes and decisions. Who we say we are on Sunday morning needs to be lived out on Monday morning, and, the rest of the week. And so how do we handle those issues that divide us? How do we form our opinions? Well, I think the best starting place is by looking at our Lord, Jesus Christ, and his philosophy and his actions.

First of all, Jesus was not afraid to hold his own leaders accountable. They said to stone a woman caught in adultery. But Jesus refused. They said to do nothing on the Sabbath, but Jesus went right on healing and teaching. In both cases, Jesus put mercy and compassion above the law. And Jesus himself protested against the Jewish administration. He specifically targeted the hierarchy. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees. You tithe mint, dill and cumin and neglect the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith.” Yes, woe to you, politicians. And talk about protests, just look at what Jesus did when he barged in and overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. It caused a riot! But here's the difference. Jesus did these things not to oppose or support a political agenda. Jesus did these things to oppose injustice, hatred, elitism, prejudice, and instead stand up for those godly virtues of mercy, compassion, tolerance, and basic human rights for the least of these. As Rev. William Sloane Coffin says, “It was Jesus Christ who crossed every boundary and broke every barrier. He crossed the boundaries of class by eating with the sinners, outcasts, and the rich, alike. He crossed the boundary of nations by pointing to a lowly Samaritan as an agent of good - doing God's will. He crossed religious boundaries by claiming the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. For in Christ’s sight, there were no insiders and outsiders, (and I’ll add, no blacks or whites or browns, no conservatives or liberals). Because in Christ’s sight, we are all of one nature and one flesh and one grief and one hope. And in Christ’s sight, if we fail to love one another (first), we will fail in all things else.”

That really is Christ's philosophy isn't it? Love. So if we are to follow Christ, it means we are to love one another. Love one another. Yet we struggle with this so much. And frankly, I'm amazed by how intolerant some of us so-called Christians can be toward one another. How we get so personally offended so easily. How rigid we are in our thinking. And consequently, how we then fail to show love to our neighbors. How we lose sight of what it means to live in community with one another, to sincerely care about one another, regardless of our differences. You know, we hear a cacophony of voices in this world trying to turn our thoughts and actions against each other. So whose voice do we listen to and follow? CNN or Fox? Well, maybe we should remember Jesus said, “My sheep hear my

voice. I know them and they follow me.” Yet, let me ask, in the midst of all the noise, can we, do we, recognize Jesus’ voice? The voice that says just being angry with a brother or sister will make us liable before God. The voice that calls us to pray for those we consider enemies, those we distrust and dislike the most. When was the last time you prayed for someone you don’t really like? The voice that teaches us that our neighbor is anyone in need. The voice that calls us to forgive an unlimited amount of times. The voice that says “Love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself.” That is the voice of Jesus Christ. “My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me.” They hear and follow the voice of love. Yes, love.

You see, when we fail to address our prejudices, when we deny anyone the gift of our love, then we fail to follow the voice of God. So we must strive to look past our differences, and see others around us as we see ourselves, as children of God, trying, just like you are trying, to cope in this very difficult world. Because in the end, when all is said and done, none of these worldly matters are going to mean a thing. What will matter is how you loved one another. With a love that unites rather than divides, that is compassionate rather than cruel, that creates peace and justice and understanding rather than anger.

There's an old African parable that makes this very clear. It was told by a colleague, Rev. Grace Imathiu. I've shared it with you a long time ago, but perhaps it's time to remind us all again. It's the story of a rat living inside the walls of a farmer's house. This rat was considered lower and different from all the other farm animals. He didn't do a lick of work, he got by stealing food and taking other things he needed. One day, Mr. Rat peered out from behind the wall and saw the farmer open up a package. The rat watched carefully to see what was inside. “Oh, no!” he said. It was a huge rat trap. Yes, now there was a rat trap in the house. In a panic, Mr. Rat marched into the farmyard and held a big rally to plead his case. He got all the other rats to join him, they came from far and wide. And you know how those rallies go. There's lots of noise, lots of manufactured excitement because the media is everywhere. “There's a rat trap in the house. It's against our rights! We’ve got to do something!” The chicken listened, the lamb listened, and the cow listened. But they really didn't like Mr. Rat or his friends that much, and besides they had their own issues to deal with. So finally the chicken said, “Well Mr. Rat, I'm thinking – there’s a rat trap in the house. So what! This has nothing to do with me. This is your problem.” And the chicken walked away. The lamb nodded at the chicken's words, and then offered just a little bit of understanding and pity, saying, “Mr. Rat, I'll be praying for you. Remember, God loves you. Take care now, you hear.” Then he, too, walked away. The cow chewed his cud,

thinking hard, and finally said, “Man, we all have to look out for ourselves, you understand what I mean.” And the cow walked off. Well, that night, very late, the rat trap went off (BAM) and there was a horrible scream from inside the farmer's house. Pandemonium breaks out in the family. What's happening? A snake had crawled into the rat trap. And the farmer, assuming it was the rat, reached down in the dark and the snake bit him. Of course, the farmer got very, very sick. And you know how it is when people get sick. They must always be given fresh, homemade, chicken soup. That's right, no more chicken. The following day as the farmer got worse and worse, some close neighbors and relatives gathered at his house to comfort him. Of course, they all had to eat something, so the farmer's wife gave permission for the lamb to be slaughtered for dinner. Delicious rack of lamb! Sadly, the farmer died, and on the day of his funeral, so many people attended, that the family gave permission for beef stew to be served as the main dish. And all because of a lowly, despicable rat.¹

So brothers and sisters, the next time you hear a rat trap go off in our house (BAM), don't think it has nothing to do with you. Racism, homophobia, poverty – rat trap in the house. Human trafficking, addiction – rat trap in the house. Lonely, desperate people around us who don't know Jesus Christ – rat trap in the house. You see, we are all one in the human family, God's family. And so let us try and really love one another. Amen.

¹ “Words of Fire, Spirit of Grace”, R. Grace Imathiu

Prayer

O Lord, we confess that often we do not love others the way we should. We are too often judgmental or angry, or just indifferent. And so we ask your help – that we could and would genuinely love one another. With the kind of love that wants for others the same as we want for ourselves. Just as we want to be treated with dignity and respect, so should we treat others with dignity and respect. Just as we don't want people making incorrect assumptions about us, let us not make any assumptions about others. Just as we want to be seen as the individuals we are, so let us see others as individuals, and not as labels. Just as we want to be happy in our homes, with our family and friends, help us remember that others too just want to be happy in their homes with family and friends. Let us learn to love as Jesus loved – without regard to race or status or political position, or lifestyle. Help us remember that you love each one of us, even with all our sins and weaknesses. May we learn to love others the same. In Jesus name we pray, amen.