

Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

Scripture: Romans 13: 8-12

“Love Your Neighbor As Yourself...” an obvious title for today’s sermon, if sermon titles should be based on the scripture passages they’re meant to address. And an obvious choice too, if I were trying to summarize the whole message of the Bible, as Jesus, Paul and others have been asked to do over the centuries. Paul writes in Romans 13 that for Christians to love your neighbor as yourself is the fulfillment of the commandments, plain and simple. All the law of the Old Testament is leading us toward this well-known Golden Rule: *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”* Yes, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

So there it is. It’s so easy it almost defies elaboration. What more is there to say? In last Sunday’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the early church congregation at Rome, he laid out for them the marks of what it means to be truly Christian: rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, associating with the lowly, not repaying evil for evil, blessing those who curse you, and overcoming evil with good. Today’s lesson is in the same vein: an exhortation to honorable Christian living.

Passages like these would seem, at first glance, to be easy and straight forward to preach. But this very fact makes them that much more challenging for the preacher to tackle. What more is there to say than Paul has said 2,000 years ago? I was pondering this this week as I cast about for an “exegetical hunch,” until I read in the paper about the President’s cancellation of DACA and the controversy swirling in the USA right now around the fate of hundreds of thousands of so-called “Dreamers,” young adults who’ve come to the country as children of undocumented immigrants, have grown up here, gone to school here, but now face the threat of deportation as illegal aliens. Yet aren’t they are our neighbors? Aren’t many of them the kids our kids have then grown up with in school? So how are we called to live out our Biblical mandate to love them, given the current political climate in Washington?

In rummaging around through my sermon files, I also found a newspaper article that I’d stashed away some time ago for future reference. It’s about a young couple who took in a convicted sex offender to live with them and their children in their upscale subdivision home. Entitled *“A Test of Faith,”* the article examines just what can be involved when people of faith take literally the commandment to *“love your neighbor as yourself.”*

The couple, Mark and Tammy LaPalme, characterized themselves as *“baby Christians,”* new and enthusiastic in their practice of the faith. They saw on TV that a convicted sex offender had recently returned to their town after 20 years of imprisonment for a rape sentence, and how due to a law making it mandatory to publicize the presence of former serious sex offenders in that community, this man had lost his job at the local packaging plant and was living out of his rattletrap old car. Looking at the bracelet that she wears around her wrist inscribed with the letters “W.W.J.D.,” Tammy asked herself: *“What would Jesus do?”* And together with her husband Mark, they sought out Nate

Sims, the ex-offender, and invited him to come live with them and their 8 year old daughter and 7 year old son in their five bedroom house.

“We feel like God had blessed us in so many ways,” Mark LaPalme said. *“We’ve been so selfish with it up to now.”* So they decided to act out what they believed Jesus would have done in the same kind of situation, inviting an outcast into their family home.

“I was in shock,” said Sims. *“I ain’t never had anyone lift a hand for me.”*

Now I’m not meaning to equate undocumented immigrants with sex offenders, or to imply that “Dreamers,” as our media is now referring to those brought by their immigrant parents to the USA as kids, aren’t just as upstanding a group of people as any of the rest of us, so please don’t get me wrong. But the story of Nate Sims and the LaPalmes is a striking story that has it’s next, and more difficult chapter.

As you can imagine, the people in the LaPalmes’ upscale neighborhood were less than thrilled with the LaPalmes’ decision, particularly since the LaPalmes had acted quickly, without notifying their neighbors. Within days, bright yellow flyers were posted around the subdivision: *“Beware! Sex Offender at Mark & Tammy LaPalme’s residence,”* giving the LaPalmes’ address and phone number. And the LaPalmes began receiving anonymous letters like the one that said: *“You say ‘To Love Thy Neighbor,’ but you are demonstrating a total disregard for our feelings, our fears, and our safety. That’s not my idea of a good ‘neighbor.’”*

Many of the LaPalmes’ neighbors reacted by staying off the streets, and shuttering their windows at night. A college aged girl who lived next door began calling on her cell phone to be escorted from her car to the house when she got home, and people wouldn’t let their kids play outside anymore. One little boy offered the change he had left over from his school lunch money to *“that man so he can go and live somewhere else and I can go see my friends again.”* The neighbors couldn’t believe the LaPalmes would be exposing their own children to the kind of risk involved in living with a man who had been diagnosed with *“serious psychopathic tendencies”* and categorized by the state’s psychiatric evaluators as in the highest risk category. The LaPalmes responded that their family was not fearful, and that there was a sense of *“peace that’s come over us.”* Yet they reacted to their neighbors as well, tearing down the yellow flyers and putting up white flyers of their own saying: *“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone!”*

So who was right and who was wrong? The bold, faithful and somewhat self-righteous LaPalmes, or the antagonistic and frightened neighborhood residents? And just who is the *“neighbor”* the Bible calls us to love: the people just like us in the neighborhood, or the immigrants, the “Dreamers,” and social outcasts as well? What does it really mean, to *“love your neighbor as yourself?”* All these questions were raised in my mind by reading this article and reflecting on our current national controversy surrounding immigration this week.

Even in the Bible, we see a development in the concept of who is our neighbor, and

how far the boundaries of our community concern should extend. In the Old Testament, it clearly was a more narrow concept. The “neighbor” of the Old Testament commandments was your tribesman, the fellow member of your own, small, ethnically exclusive community. No gentile outside the tribe of Israel was within the scope of what God considered as the “chosen people.” To love your neighbor back then meant to love only your own family, your own tribe, people just like you.

Jesus, of course, revised and expanded this concept. Remember the man who asked him point-blank: “*Who is my neighbor?*” He responded with the story of the Good Samaritan, of how all the upright and decent people of the Jewish community ignored the man who’d been robbed and left for dead alongside the road, all except the man from the hated, outcast Samaritan tribe, who had compassion on the man, took him *not* to his home, it might be noted, but to an *inn*, and there nursed him back to health. This Samaritan is pointed to by Jesus as the one who acted like a true neighbor in the story, and he then tells the man asking him the question that if he wants to truly act like a neighbor, go and do likewise. I’m sure this is what the LaPalmes thought they were doing when they took Nate Sims in. They had had their concept of neighbor expanded by their Christian faith, and so now befriending the outcast was the route they chose to express their love of neighbor, as they thought God would want them to do.

But in so doing, did they also include their family and their own neighborhood residents in their working concept of neighbor? This is the harder question to answer. Many would say “*No*,” that they’d acted rashly and in a cavalier fashion, disregarding their neighbors’ well-being and that of their own family as well.

Who was right and who was wrong? It’s not up to us or to anyone to stand in judgment of their actions. That’s something reserved for God alone to do. But it is interesting to note that our lesson for this morning says: “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” It’s doesn’t just say: “*Love your neighbor*; “*yourself*” is included.

“*Only a healthy, whole person - one who is capable of loving herself or himself - is capable of loving another.*” writes Charles Cousar in his commentary on the Romans 13 passage. “*Love of the other does not require self-deprecation or self-hatred, emotions that in fact inhibit the ability to love others. Love of the other begins with a self-love that is able to acknowledge and enjoy the handiwork of God in every creature.*”¹ We might add that this includes the LaPalmes’ children and neighbors.

“*The injunction of (Romans 13) verse 9,*” writes Cousar, “*is to the love of the neighbor, not to some universal love. Even if the category of neighbor includes those usually regarded as enemies (or aliens), it nevertheless concerns those with whom one comes in contact. Paul calls for the difficult task of real love for real people who are met in everyday life, not theoretical love for humanity as a whole.*”

Nate Sims was a real person who was difficult to love. Of course, the LaPalmes’ neighbors were real people too, and the way they reacted so hysterically made them equally, if not more of a challenge to love. As Christians we’re called to the difficult task

of loving real people and ourselves, with all our warts and flaws, not just to some abstract concept of neighbor.

“Besides this,” writes Paul to the church at Rome, *“you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”* It’s great for us to consider all the theoretical issues of “who is our neighbor” and “how should we love them.” But Paul makes the point that we don’t have the luxury of that kind of time. As Christians, we believe the day of judgment and salvation, kind of like Hurricane Irma, is fast approaching from the future, and we as a society and as individuals will be called to account for how we’ve lived here and now. *“What makes it imperative that Christians behave in a worthy manner,”* writes Cousar, *“both within the community and toward the outside, is that the time itself has grown short. There is no slack time, no cushion that allows for future correction. What happens now genuinely matters.”*²

The LaPalmes sensed this urgency, and acted out of their “born-again” Christian faith. The article about them ends with an update: Nate Sims returned from a new job he had just gotten to their house one day to find TV crews all around, there to film him for the syndicated television show “Extra.” It says he packed his bags and fled, without even saying good-bye. The LaPalmes were devastated and accusatory. *““ They drove him out of here,”* Mark LaPalme says of his neighbors. *‘They didn’t want him in this neighborhood. They didn’t want him in this town. And that’s (exactly) what they accomplished!’”*³

Loving real people isn’t easy. And it doesn’t always work out the way we’d want it to. It’s a much harder, more complex task than at first we might suspect. But it continues to be our calling as Christians, a challenge to us across the centuries, an imperative to us as the night wanes and the day is fast approaching. So together, let’s try to love ourselves, our families, our neighbors, complete strangers, immigrants and outcasts the best we can, joining now with saints and sinners at this communion table where together we’re nourished for the difficult life of faith.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1 & 2. Charles Cousar, Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A, pp. 474-475

3. All quotations from the LaPalmes taken from the Associated Press, Sept. 1, 1999.