

“The Church as a School of Love”
Luke 10:25-37 & 1 Corinthians 13

This sermon series is about the mission of the church, i.e., its reason for existence. We are here to learn to love together: Love God, love neighbor, love ourselves, and love God’s creation. One might ask: If love is at the core of our nature as people who are created in the image of God, then why do we need a school of love? My answer is that we need each other to grow into that full potential of love. Much like regular school where we learn the basic stories and skills for life, we need a spiritual school for learning the paths of love. We need to encounter the stories, wisdom, and practices of our ancestors. The greatest source of power in the life of the church is the power of story. The community of faith gives us one of the best stories of love which has the power to transform every aspect of our lives and of our world.

The Israeli writer and thinker, Yuval Noah Harari writes this, “Stories are the greatest human invention. People need stories in order to cooperate...But there's also something else very important: they can change the way they cooperate by changing the stories they believe.”

Harari has a lot of wisdom for our time right now. Here is a clip from a March interview with Stephen Colbert: <https://youtu.be/2w37ty9gGU8>.

Despite our repeated failures to live by Jesus’ vision of love, the Christian faith shares a very expansive story of love in the world. It transforms our tribal ways of thinking about love. One of the greatest stories ever told by Jesus about this kind vision is that of the Good Samaritan. This was in response to the question: Who is my neighbor?

The story takes place as Jesus is beginning his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem which is the climax of the whole story of Jesus’ ministry. He is going to his final destination for the biggest confrontation of his life. On the way, as it is recorded in chapter 9 of the Gospel of Luke, we read about Jesus sending some messengers ahead of him to ask a Samaritan village to host him. However, the Samaritans did not agree to receive Jesus. The Samaritans believed that worship in Jerusalem was false. They were not going to support a pilgrim who was going to keep a feast at the wrong sanctuary.

The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews who married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. The origin of the Samaritans goes back to 740 BCE when the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians deported most of the leading families and skilled workers out of the country and sent them into exile in various places throughout their empire. At the same time, the Assyrians imported into Israel other conquered nations within their empire. The result was that the different people intermarried with the Jews who were left behind. These became the Samaritans. They were Jews who married foreigners and who incorporated into their religion some of the foreign religions of the people they married. That is why there were major frictions between the so-called pure Jews and the ethnically mixed Samaritans. That is why the Samaritans were hostile to Jesus who was a pure Jew on his way to a religious festival

in Jerusalem and they refused him hospitality, which is a major offense in that time and culture. James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, were so upset with the rejection of the Samaritans that they asked Jesus if it was okay to command fire to come down from heaven and consume those Samaritans. Jesus had every logical reason to despise the Samaritans and to consider them as a bad example of hospitality and generosity.

This background helps us to see how radical Jesus was when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus was asked by a lawyer about the way to eternal life. To explain what the Law of Moses was really about in terms of loving God and loving one's neighbor, Jesus gave the shocking example of the Good Samaritan. We are all familiar with the parable and the enmity between Jews and Samaritans but what we tend to overlook is that Jesus himself was the target of Samaritan hostility. He was just rejected by the Samaritans, and what does he do to repay them? He does not agree with James and John to rain fire on them. He does not say bad things about them. Instead, he uses the Samaritans as an example of generosity and hospitality in the parable. Let's listen to Luke 10:25-37:

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ 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." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus shocked his listeners, especially those who were travelling with him, by telling them the person who provided rescue for the injured man in the ditch was a Samaritan. The hero in the story was the villain in real life. Those who were expected to practice the Law of Moses, the priest and the Levite, actually broke the Law, while the one who was expected to break the Law, the Samaritan, was the one who kept it. Jesus was not only telling a parable, but he was also living it. He was demonstrating to his followers what it meant to live in the kingdom of God.

This story resonates with us so deeply because it speaks of what we are capable of. It gives us an incredible vision for humanity. It gives the imagination for love! If we want to deal with enmities, conflicts, and wars, we need to tell and live a story of radical love.

When you walked in, you were given a Mad Libs version of this story created by Susan Sparks. I invite you to complete it with the help of a couple of neighbors or by yourself.

We will read it together and you can shout out your answers:

A certain man went down from _____ (modern town) and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his _____ (nicest item of clothing/jewelry you can think of) and wounded him and then departed, leaving him half dead.

And by chance there came down a certain _____ (title for a modern religious leader) that way. and when she saw him, she simply passed by on the other side.

And likewise a _____ (high level corporate title) came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain _____ (a person or persons who are disliked), as he journeyed, came where he was and when he saw him, he had compassion on him.

And he went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in _____ (name of a drug store first aid item), and set him on his own _____ (modern mode of transportation), and brought him to a _____ (name of a modern hotel), and took care of him.

And the next day when he departed, he took out _____ (method of payment), and gave it to the host, and said unto him, _____ (some modern hip slang greeting) take care of him; and if you spend more than I have given you, when I come again, I will repay you.

How does this story speak to you about love? What expansiveness of love are you longing for in your life and in our world today? How might you tell and live this story?

We are going to take a few moments to meditate on the fourteen qualities listed in 1 Corinthians 13, a list developed by Brian McLaren:

1. Love is essential: without it, nothing else matters.
2. Love is patient.
3. Love is kind.
4. Love is generous, not envious.
5. Love is appreciative of others, not boastful of self.
6. Love is humble, not arrogant.
7. Love is courteous, not rude.
8. Love is flexible; it does not insist on its own way.
9. Love is gracious, not irritable.
10. Love is merciful, not resentful.
11. Love is positive: It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

12. Love is resilient: Bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things.
13. Love is perpetual: It never ends and never goes out of style.
14. Love is supreme, even greater than faith and hope. Amen.