

Sunday, May 6, 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Easter/Full of Faith V
“Love Your Neighbor”

Acts 10: 34-48

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Story Interrupted Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

I'm sure you've heard some variation of the joke, “A priest, a pastor and a rabbi walk into a bar.” Pick your punchline. They all play on a similar kind of a role, that of religious figure, and some kind of contrast in difference. And it's not a group of people the average person typically sees together in a room.

Part of what predisposes us to the humor is the set up itself is funny. It's people together in a setting we don't think of seeing them and you kinda have to instinctively get that part to get the joke. A problem we have looking at the Bible is sometimes we'll read a section and we miss that the people described wouldn't normally be together in the setting we're seeing them in. Oh, ok, Cornelius and his men are invited into Peter's house... hold up – because it sounds like you're about to set up a punchline. A religiously observant Hebrew man inviting a Gentile and his men into his home – for the ancient reader I might as well have said, “A duck, a turtle and a penguin walk into a bar...”

This community serve day we continue our Full of Faith sermon series that started back on Easter Sunday – tying in various aspects of Christian living to the new life with have in Christ. Specifically, how does serving fit into the life of a disciple of Jesus? Or, allow me to be more provocative still – what is the church supposed to be about? Because let's be honest – there's very little evangelism, that is, telling people about Jesus, that happens when we go out and pull weeds or fill food bags or play board games with residents at nursing homes. There are plenty of community service and social service agencies aimed at meeting the needs of the community and what makes the church unique is that we tie what we do to the mission of Jesus. And so some might ask, is this worthwhile? If it is worthwhile, isn't it secondary? Is this taking us off target from what we're supposed to be about, telling people about Jesus?

Peter invites in these men, Romans soldiers, sent by a centurion into his home as his guests. And that is a shocking line in and of itself. God had to break down some barriers Peter had up, reinforced over a lifetime to help him be ready to receive these guys into his home.

Coming into God's presence in worship at the temple, meant being ritually clean. Interacting with unclean Gentiles, who ate pork and shellfish and were uncircumcised and worshipped false gods and idols was one thing in the marketplace, but having them into your home – this made you unclean. God had to drive this point home to Peter, three times in a dream dropping a blanket from heaven covered with all the unclean foods forbidden for God's people in the Old Testament Scriptures to get Peter to realize – God was making not only these things – but these men – clean. And then Peter takes it a step further, he goes with these men and enters the home of the Gentile. **DON'T MISS THIS! THIS IS SCANDALOUS!** Welcoming a person into your home in the near East is tantamount to oneness, fellowship, family. Peter did not first give the condition that they should be as he is before he extends or accepts a gesture of love – “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”

Peter has no idea why these men are calling on him. He doesn't push anything on them. He serves them, shows them hospitality. There's no agenda or conditions in it – this is what he's called to do. In short, he is loving his neighbor. Peter often is a good example of what not to do, because his foibles so often stand in contrast to Jesus' love, but here the disciple shows what he has learned from the Teacher. There are no strings or conditions attached. He's loving and serving.

In Matthew 22 – this is the week that Jesus is crucified, and He's at the temple being grilled by a critical crowd who are looking to trap Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” What He does here is a critical, constructive, beautiful way to talk about what God's desire is for all of us – so relatable that it sounds easy and yet so hard to put into practice. “37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

These two: the greatest, love God and the second, love your neighbor, sum up the whole shebang. If you aren't loving God or you aren't loving your neighbor, no matter what you

do all your attempts to be holy and religious don't count. If you don't have love, it's just noise. Don't tell me what a friend I have in Jesus until I know what a friend I have in you.

Back to that earlier question – I submit to you that mission and evangelism, absent of genuine love for our neighbor for the sake of their needs amounts to a bunch of noise. Because sometimes the reputation of the church is something like a bait and switch, “We love you, we love you, we're here for you... oh, you don't want to be a member of our church, we don't love you. Oh, you don't confess that there's one Trinitarian God and that Jesus is your Savior, we don't have time for you.” What do you do if someone doesn't want to hear it? Isn't ready to hear it? Holds hands up to say stop, don't bother me with that religious stuff? Well... you love them. If you don't have love, it's just noise. **The Great Commandment, and the 2nd one like it, is bigger than the Great Commission.**

I'm under no delusion that the church formally organizing a Community Serve Day that we fan out twice a year through our community ought to “check off the box” of loving people well. It's one structured thing meant to get us all reflecting – who has been put in my life for me to love (hint: everyone you know).

Peter gets it and calls it out – he understands that love and the Great Commandments comes before the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations, baptize and preach (and by the way, next week we'll learn the same about family – Genesis comes before Matthew. Family comes first in the list of your responsibilities). I love how Peter doesn't thrust the Great Commission in this kind of disrespectful way, he asks why did you call for me? And Cornelius tells him, it's because we want you to tell us what God wants us to hear.

Love leads to God working through us to work on another's heart, to an opportunity to witness. We don't love in order to be about the mission, but we only get to be about the mission when we love. Isn't it the same for us? Loved by God, then sent on His mission. Jesus died for us at our most unlovable. God adopts you when you have nothing to offer. He forgives you as a poor miserable sinner. He welcomes you to His table. And then He sends us out. Loved by God and loved by Peter, Cornelius and his men are ready and willing to hear God's mission.

So, we go out in this community to love. There are some who would say that this is a less valuable endeavor than something specifically mission focused – we're just doing social

service work, we're not insisting on sharing the Gospel with people. That makes loving and serving "less than." No! The Great Commandments first – and yes, be ready to give an account for the hope that is in you, but the Great Commission is bound up in God's love. And when someone questions or doesn't like what you have to say, then what? Keep loving. You love them because you love them, not because you want or expect something from them. Keep the first things first and look for opportunities to doing Great Commission. Love opens up the door to sharing the Gospel. In Jesus' name, Amen.