

Plain and Simple: Love

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

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As a church family, we have all been deeply affected by the death of our brother, Rob Wilkinson this past Thursday. Rob was a lover...of people and of God.

When I got the text from daughter Jenna that they had taken him to the hospital on Wednesday morning, I went. There with Marjorie and Jenna and Nate Dove (our intern), we talked and cried and prayed and hugged and remembered stories...and we laughed. I told them Rob would always ask me what my sermon was about for the coming Sunday...and he would also ask with a smile, "Is it a good one?" Well, I told Rob that morning this week, "Rob, my sermon this week is called: Plain and Simple: Love." And while some might refute it, even in a coma, he gave a huge grin and moved his leg at the same time. So Rob, this one's for you!

It seems that I have preached on or near this subject for the last several times I have been in the pulpit. But God, do we need love...As Christians Jesus called his followers...and calls us to move beyond the legalism of religion and rules and just love: plain and simple. Paul says, the one who loves another fulfills the Law.

This may sound good, but when you think about it, it may be harder to put into action. Instead of trying to find compassion and understanding, as part of a loving response...like many others I often judge, to keep the person at arm's distance.

Such was the case when I saw Joel Osteen's response after Hurricane Harvey who apparently delayed opening his church, a former sports arena, after the storm because, he says, he wasn't asked by the city. Or Kirk Cameron (former child star and now Evangelical leader) who skipped meteorological explanations and cited a passage in the Old Testament Book of Job that describes storms created by God as either "punishment" or a means to "demonstrate his faithful love."

That's a twisted view of God and systematic theology. There are many instances of imagery of God in the Old Testament acting in large and dramatic ways. And the Ten Commandments were laws which were given along with countless other to help address a people who were in covenant with God and needed direction after having wandered in the wilderness for so many

years. But let's be clear, God does not zap people with storms, causing some to suffer for what they may or may not have done.

One scholar says: *While the address of the commandments is individual, the concern is not some private welfare. The focus of the commandments is vocational, to serve the life and health of the community, to which end the individual plays an important role. The first commandment (You shall love the Lord you God with all of your mind, body and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself) lays a claim: How you think about God will deeply affect how you think about and act toward your neighbor.*

But I'm the first to admit that while I love God with all my being, and want to love my neighbor as myself, I fall short. I get compassion fatigue. And judging others/separating myself is one way to cope. So forgive me, Joel Osteen and Kirk Cameron.

Denial is another way many of us cope with the call to love others. Overwhelmed by how complex and difficult life is now, some have decided it is just too much to take. So, we pull the covers over our heads to avoid the really difficult issues of life that have been thrown right at us on the cable news or social media. We have all kinds of ways of avoiding the hard truths and suffering by our fellow human beings that beg for our attention, and which ultimately keep us human. We lose ourselves in the images that play out on our television screens or in the world of social media. If we don't blame the media for overblowing issues, we may distract ourselves by overusing alcohol or other drugs. We may become workaholics, keeping busy every waking minute. Or maybe we go shopping. Somehow spending money on something, on anything, seems to make us feel like everything's really just fine.

But the reality is if we find ourselves in that reality, we're sleepwalking, as Paul suggests. We use these and many other distractions to keep from having to face the painful truths of our world. Storms come and wipe out whole neighborhoods and even cities. Planes fly into buildings driven by people who intend harm. Children are abused or are trafficked or used as pawns for those who would do them harm. People live on the edge of literally losing everything, clinging to jobs that have little or no future. Families are coming apart at the seams. It's painful. Really painful.

We marvel how every one of the Ten Commandments can be broken. Morality seems to be irrelevant, even for people of faith. The only moral code for some is "if it feels good do it." And when we widen our gaze, we find that there are wars raging all over the world, wars that spread violence like an epidemic and leave in its wake thousands of victims, mostly innocent. And yet we can find that violence in our own cities plagued by hatred for people of different nationalities and ethnicities. But rather than taking a hard look at all this, it's too painful, and we'd much rather pull the covers over our heads and sleep through it all until the nightmares some people are living have gone away.

Paul reminds us, however, that we can't live like that if we choose to follow Christ. He says that the light of day has dawned, and we have to pull the covers off our heads and get up to

face the sunrise. In the light of day, we can no longer ignore the harsh realities of the world in which we live. When we neglect to live out the faith we profess, to love others as God loves us, we're living like we're still in the darkness. We're sleepwalking through life. Part of the problem is that when we close our eyes to the hard things around us, the pain and suffering, the fear and hatred, we also close our eyes to the beauty around us and shut our hearts to love. The light of Christ makes it clear that we cannot sit idly by while others suffer. To love others means we must see them and acknowledge them, feel their pain and respond. It hurts. It's hard, but that is the call of following Jesus.

The call asks us to act "as people who live in the light of day" (Rom. 13:13). I think at least part of what that means is that we live our lives in such a way as to bring the light to those around us. And if we have a hard time figuring out how to do that, maybe the first step is to decide we're going to treat the people around us, all the people around us, regardless of creed or color or economic status or educational background, with respect, and kindness, and compassion.

What if we understood our calling as people who follow Jesus to be **only** about loving God and loving others...without judging them, rejecting them or trying to "save them" into believing the way WE understand faith requires? That doesn't mean we don't speak the truth with love, and call out what is wrong for the sake of justice.

I dare say, we would all need God much more, because that is difficult. Really difficult.

That would mean giving people the benefit of the doubt; Taking responsibility for our actions and responses; stopping ourselves from judging and criticizing each and every thing we don't like about someone...and then spreading that in gossipy way; and the Gospel lesson continues that by showing us how to lovingly talk with those who have left the community for whatever reason and hear them out and speak the truth with love.

WPC has a history of being on the side of love and not hammering people with the LAW. Interestingly, as I scanned through Facebook early this morning to check on people, I came across a posting from Elizabeth Boone MacLean. She grew up in this congregation and was sent out into ministry by this church during Stewart MacColl and Steve Jacob's time. I met her and became friends with her in seminary. She now is the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Austin, TX. The article she posted by another young woman is entitled, "How I became a Heretic, or How the Evangelical, Conservative Church lost me". Elizabeth's response was: So thankful I was raised in an environment where love and grace are always more important than law.

That's been my experience here. May we continue to be true to our roots, and to Jesus the Christ. It's plain and simple: Love.