

Sermon Series: Who Is My Neighbor? Sermon Title: "More Than Words"
Leviticus 19:14-16; Isaiah 12; Matthew 7:1-5, 12; John 15:12-17; Philippians 2:1-4
Salem United Methodist Church; November 13, 2016
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The world has changed since last week. With the presidential election results, some of us are rejoicing while others are distraught, grieving, and fearful for our future. The election results showed how deeply divided our nation is. The times are changing, but the Word of God has not. As Christians we are commanded to love our neighbor, to stand up for any injustice to others, and to seek God's will.

Many of us did not sleep well on Tuesday night. We were anxious about the election results. I was waking up every hour checking on the latest news about the election, and was surprised like many of us of the results. During this presidential campaign, I tried to stay away from listening or reading all the negative political rhetoric. I refused to allow the labeling, slandering, and hurling of insults to pollute my soul and have power over me. However, I did observe how the media magnified this by rerunning sound bites until many were echoing the rhetoric and spewing words of hate. Also, during this presidential campaign I have tried to remain politically neutral as a pastor. Instead, I have purposefully pointed to scripture as the source of how we are to live, love, and care for others because our political convictions are to reflect the tenets of the Christian faith.

There is a great divide in our nation that has grown deeper with each election since we entered this century. I remember a time where Republicans and Democrats would agree to disagree. They could even joke that their votes would cancel out the other, as they remained friends. When this divide began to crack open, I heard it said that one could not be a Democrat and be a Christian, as well as, one could not be a Republican and be a Christian. Neither statement made any sense to me. As this divide has deepened, we have let go of morality and have resorted to some of the vilest language I have ever heard in the public arena. Many of you have shared with me stories of political division in your families and asked for prayers of reconciliation. There has been political division here at Salem, too, but I have also witnessed both respect for one another and restraint. I am grateful that there is a place like Salem where we can come together with our differing political views and worship the One True God as we claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

I chose this sermon series, "Who is my neighbor?" long before anyone knew what the outcome of the election would be. This question was asked to Jesus by an expert of the law. Jesus answered the question with a story about a person that was despised, but who showed mercy to one who needed help. Two weeks ago I preached on this passage, known as the Good Samaritan, and proclaimed that there is not one person on the face of this earth who is not our neighbor. So how are we to love our neighbor?

The Bible is very clear on this. First, God gave Moses rules about the treatment of our neighbors. The passage we read from Leviticus states that we are not to revile anyone who is deaf or put a stumbling block to anyone who is blind. Revile means to insult or abuse another. Over 5000 years ago God told Moses to tell the people this is something we are not to do. Yet, there are those who still make fun of people with disabilities. The Leviticus passage also speaks to fairness. Neither the poor nor the rich should get special treatment, but we are to seek justice for all. We are not to slander or say anything malicious about our neighbor. To slander someone is to spread lies that destroy their character. God did not allow for any of this. The neighbor law continues that we are not to profit from the blood of our neighbor which I interpret to mean that we are not to take advantage of one another. We are to do what is right, just, and fair. Jesus said it the best, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." Jesus doesn't say do in some things, or pick and choose, but in *everything* treat others the way we want to be treated. Some of us might recognize another interpretation of this phrase, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We have been taught that this is the "Golden Rule." During the time of Jesus there was a Roman saying, "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you." William Barclay, a biblical scholar, applauded Jesus for putting a positive spin on his rule. He wrote, "The attitude which says, 'I must do no harm to people' is quite different from the attitude which says, 'I must do my best to help people.'" If we are going to be making America great again, how will we be doing our best to help all people? As citizens of this country we pledge that we live under one God, that we are indivisible, and that liberty and justice is for all. Our pledge of allegiance to our country reflects the Golden Rule, God's Gold Standard for humanity.

Each of us knows how challenging this Golden Rule is to keep. We try and we fail. We repent and ask God to show mercy, to turn us around so we can try again. God's Gold Standard for humanity has no loopholes. It does not allow us to treat some people the way we would like to be treated, and not others. Yet, we do this consciously and unconsciously. We will judge a person by the way s/he looks, speaks, dresses, believes, acts. We will judge them and put them down, and be totally unaware of our own despicableness. We as individuals and we as humanity are really good at breaking God's Gold Standard. Bullying, abuse of every kind, molestations, rapes, unequal pay for the same work, slavery, lynching, stoning, kidnapping, persecutions, torture, killings, genocides, and wars have occurred throughout our human history because human beings have disobeyed the Golden Rule. We choose to not find ways to love our neighbors. Instead, we choose to love ourselves and the hell with everyone else.

St. Hildegard of Bingen, a mystic in the eleventh century wrote, "Human beings alone are capable of disobeying God's laws, because they try to be wiser than God. . . . Other creatures fulfill the commandments of God; they honor [God's] laws. . . . But human beings rebel against those laws, defying them in word and action. And in doing so, they inflict terrible cruelty on the rest of God's creation." Hildegard wrote this about one thousand years ago. It is as true today as back then. We still think we are wiser than God. C. S. Lewis wrote, "As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you."

The people in the church in Philippi were looking down on each other. The Apostle Paul writes to them, "Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others." With humility...this means we are to be courteous and respectful of our neighbors. Humility is the opposite of arrogance, boastfulness, aggressiveness, vanity, and "It's all about me." C. S. Lewis also wrote, "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less." Humility is showing love to our neighbors. Humility is doing what is best for our neighbors. Striving to be humble and living God's Gold Standard the best we can with our both our Republican and Democrat neighbors may just heal the divide in our nation. Can we put the other first? Can we listen to the pain that each carries? Can we really hear and strive to understand? Can we be fully present even if we disagree?

Loving our neighbor is more than words. As Christians our work has not changed because of an election. We are still called to give a helping hand. We are still called to protect the vulnerable, to work for just pay so people can live, to be less blind to others, to embrace those who are troubled, to speak out against injustices and work to right those injustices. Our neighbors are still dealing with chronic illnesses, struggling with a marriage, feeling hopeless, or being bullied because they are different somehow...

We at Salem are to express God's love to all. How do we do that? We sent money and needed supplies to a flooded-out family in Sri Lanka. We give food so struggling families can have a feast at Thanksgiving. We buy presents for youth whose families are having issues so they are not forgotten at Christmas. For the past seven years, we have participated in a Thanksgiving Service in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims can gather together and give thanks. And we are trying something new, to reach out to the commuters who drive by our church every day with coffee and a prayer. Salem is receiving a \$500 grant to assist us to get this ministry to commuters started.

We at Salem live up to what the name means—a church where people can find healing, where those who are broken can experience a sense of wholeness, a place that offers peace and love, a place where we strive to live up to God's Gold Standard, where we treat others better than we would treat ourselves.

As we continue to strive to live up to God's Gold Standard, I challenge us in the next few weeks to find one person who voted differently than we did. Ask them if they would share with you why they voted the way they did. Listen, really listen. Don't interject your disagreements or perspectives. Listen. Truly try to understand. Feel their pain and fears, or their hopes and joys depending on the situation. Ask if they would listen to your reasons why you voted for your candidate. Then ask them if they are willing to listen, really listen and try to understand where you are coming from. Pray for the person you listening to. Perhaps this kind of one-on-one dialogue may be a model we can offer to our nation for healing.

Resources: Sermon Series: The Art of Neighboring, Church of the Resurrection; *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* by William Barclay; Hildegard of Bingen: Devotions, Prayers & Living Wisdom; Richard Rohr Mediation, Created to Love.

