

## Love, or Fear?

B-8; 2 Corith. 8:7-15; Mark 5:211-43

Robert Woody, 7/1/18

*Sermon-in-a-Sentence: Our call to love all of our neighbors  
will always challenge us to overcome the fear that separates us.*

In our Gospel reading, Jesus responds to the request of a **wealthy** Jewish leader of the synagogue, to come to his home to heal his 12-year-old daughter, who was near death. Ironically, along the way, an old **poor** woman, wove her way through the crowd to touch Jesus' cloak, seeking healing from a condition that had plagued her for 12 years, and had drained all her resources.

Jesus healed them both. He poured out his love on **both** of them – the wealthy young girl of a synagogue leader, and the old, poor woman. Another example of Jesus loving **all** his neighbors, even in awkward situations.

Our first reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is also about the challenges of loving our neighbors. The context is pretty complicated. Paul is writing to a group of Gentile Christians in Corinth, a city in ancient Greece, who were part of one of the churches he had started in an earlier missionary journey. He had previously invited them to make a large donation to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were mostly poor and struggling.

But the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, initially, were very skeptical and denigrating of most of the Gentile Christians in Greece and around the Mediterranean Sea. Why? Because the men were not being circumcised like the Jewish Christians, and they were not following other Jewish “rules” and “traditions.”

But when Paul returned to Jerusalem and shared the stories of the Gentile Christians, and the growth and vitality of their faith communities, over time, the Jewish Christians became more accepting of their Gentile brothers and sisters. They were able to agree to disagree, accept diversity, and focus on **love** instead of **fear** or **anger**.

And now in our reading, Paul is again inviting the Gentile Christians in Corinth, many of whom were fairly wealthy, to love their Jewish brothers and sisters, by donating money to the church in Jerusalem.

“I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the generousness of your love . . . .

it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need.”

Over time, these diverse Christian neighbors, overcame their **fear** of diversity, and learned to **love** one another, despite their differences. And the wealthy Gentile Christians helped the needy Jewish Christians.

Today, after the 10:30 service, we will be celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, celebrating America. I love my country, and I know you do too. I, and we, have been so blessed to grow up in and live in a country that provides so many opportunities and blessings. Most of us have been able to live very abundant lives. God has blessed America. For the most part, we, as Americans, have done a good job of respecting and loving one another, and loving our neighbors.

And, as a country, we are not perfect.

We have done a **pretty good** job of following Jesus' command that we love our diverse neighbors. But, sometimes we mess up. Sometimes, we as a nation, make choices that are difficult for some people and sometimes even abusive. It's part of our history.

Our nation and our Church supported slavery for almost two centuries. Families were separated and abused. It was OK for family members to be taken from their families and sold, never to be seen again.

And that's where it gets complicated for the Church. If we think some of our neighbors are being abused by our country, by our government, are we, the Church, supposed to simply turn away and ignore the abuse, and not talk about it because it's "political"? When we talk about "separation of church and state" does that mean we, the Church, are supposed to ignore or turn away from our neighbors who are suffering because it's about "political" policies? Does it mean we can't talk about such issues in church?

Clearly **partisan** politics should not be part of the Church. We should not get involved as a church in supporting the Democratic or Republican parties, or political candidates.

But does that mean we are not supposed to address situations where our neighbors are being abused or neglected, even if it involves government or politics? Do we focus on loving our neighbors, or on fear of crossing the line from "worship" to addressing "political" issues?

This is a complicated and challenging issue. And my son, Seth, has made it much more challenging for me and Julie. As most of you know, we just spent two weeks on vacation, which began with Seth & Libby's wedding in Boston, and ended with us celebrating our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in Mystic, Connecticut and New York City.

The wedding was planned, set up and run by a big group of Seth and Libby's friends, most of whom are members of various Social Justice Action Groups, like **Momentum**, **Cosecha**, **If Not Now**. **Momentum** is Seth's Community Organizing Training Group, that he leads. **Cosecha** is a Social Justice group for immigrants, especially Dreamers, that Seth's team has trained, and that Julie and I have been supporting here in San Antonio. **If Not Now** is a group of young Jews supporting Palestine. Seth is now on their board.

Seth and Libby, and these young adults see their **faith as a call to action**, to serve the needy, to love their neighbors, especially those who are suffering the most.

The night before the wedding, we gathered with the families and these social activist young adults for a time of **chanting** and **prayer**. Many of these young adults who have left the traditional Church, come together weekly for a time of meditation and chanting, to inspire and guide their social justice actions.

As some of you know, Seth's **Momentum** group now has a relationship with Richard Rohr's **Contemplation and Action Group**, and Seth and his team are training Richard Rohr's staff on how to move from contemplation and meditation to real action.

So what is the role of the Church today? **When** and **how** are we supposed to address difficult **social justice** issues? Immigration is a good example. There has been so much suffering and abuse among immigrants, especially children who have been separated from their parents. Julie and I attended the immigration rally in front of the San Fernando cathedral yesterday, and among the many speakers were rabbis and pastors. Should the Church stand up and oppose these abusive policies, even if they are "political"?

Well, our bishops have. I assume many of you have seen the letter our bishops wrote and shared with all the churches in the diocese. We included it as an insert in last Sunday's bulletin and in our Wednesday email, and copies are in the entrance ways today. Here's what Bishop Reed and Bishop Brooke-Davidson wrote:

"We like many of you, have watched and read with increasing dismay and frustration the federal government's use of family separation as a blunt instrument of immigration policy along our border with Mexico. We have been embarrassed and angered to see our political leaders point fingers at each other while children and their mothers (it's almost always mothers) are taken away from each other. We can imagine little that could be more heart-breaking or traumatizing – for children or parents – than to be forcibly separated with no awareness of when, or if, we would see one another again. . . . We believe that this policy, with its stated aim of deterring people from crossing into the United States illegally, is contrary to the Gospel and grieves the heart of Jesus. . . . as Christians, we are all commanded by our Lord to love one another as he loves us, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves – whether that neighbor is a church member whose politics you can't stand, or a politician you distrust, or a poor woman and her child from a distant land. Jesus says they are all neighbors."

The Church should not have a role in **partisan** politics. But I believe, and apparently our bishops believe, the Church should, like Jesus, stand up for and be willing to stir up opposition to abusive actions, even if they are in a "political" context. That's what it means to truly love our neighbors, all of them.

The real challenge, I think, is choosing between **love** and **fear**. It is never easy to reach out and love a stranger, especially someone who comes from a different nation, society, race, religion, economic status. Love often requires vulnerability. There is often a **risk** that they might scam you. That immigrants might come to our country not to get away from abuse in their countries, but rather to take advantage of us.

Just before we left for vacation, a young couple came by the church office asking for financial assistance. They had been evicted from their apartment and had to move all their furniture and stuff into storage, which used up all their cash. They needed money for gas and to stay in a hotel. They seemed legitimate, but I wasn't sure. I felt like we should offer them our guest house for the two weeks we would be away on vacation. I called Julie, and she was OK, but we were both nervous. What if they trashed the guest house or stole our furniture? We were both very anxious, but we decided we should do it.

When we returned, everything was in great condition. The husband had found a job working for the construction company across the street. They had washed all the sheets and towels and cleaned the house. We were relieved. We've had similar experiences before.

It's not always easy to love our neighbors, especially when they are strangers. It's hard to take risks. And sometimes it won't work. Someone might take advantage of our generosity. We need to be **wise**.

But if we let **fear** overcome our call to **love** one another, and love our neighbors, especially those in great need, are we really following **Jesus**?

A big part of what I love about Rec is our diversity. We are not, and have never always been on the same page on every difficult issue. But we have been able for the most part to agree to disagree. The many times we have reached out to welcome people, who most of the Church feared and refused to welcome, have always been difficult. But we have been willing and able to agree to disagree, so that we could take on difficult issues, and welcome people who were not being welcomed in most churches: veterans, divorcees, 12 Steppers, women leaders, gays and lesbians.

Our world, and the Church, and Rec will always face these difficult issues. I pray that we will hold on to our DNA that has let us truly love our neighbors, and welcome people that most churches turned away. I pray that we will continue to let the **love** of Christ overcome our **fear**, and guide us in **loving our neighbors**, even when we, the Church, face difficult, controversial and scary issues.

Amen