

## **Do Unto Others: Love** **Matthew 22:34-40**

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October 27, 2024

I've had several conversations this past week about the growing anxiety in our country as we approach what will be a pivotal election in the story of democracy. One friend commented on how the anxiety is palpable. You can feel it everywhere you go. We all know that how this election comes out will change the way we live and shape our country's political and social policy for the next decade or more. No matter which candidate they support, I think everyone, on both sides of the aisle, is worried about the outcome of the election. Who will win? What does that mean for our future individually and collectively? Will the election be fair? Will the results be accepted? Will there be violence? I even know of people who are not going to travel after November 1st because they are so anxious about domestic terrorism during the election week.

Another thing I've heard people say recently is, "I've done what I can. I've given money to my preferred candidate. I've encouraged people to vote. I've voted myself. And now I feel so helpless because all we can do is wait."

Of course, as a rule, we don't like to wait sitting in the discomfort of uncertainty. And we don't like to feel like there is nothing we can do to influence the future. The good news is that as Christ-followers, we don't have to wait, and we don't have to feel helpless. God has work for us to do right now, on election day, and after.

We are wrapping up our "Do Unto Others" sermon series in which we have been exploring how to live out the Golden Rule in these weeks before the election. We've talked about intentionally aligning our behaviors with the teachings of Jesus by acting with kindness, humility, and respect. There is one quality that we have yet to explore, though, and it is the most important - love. Jesus tells us plainly that the greatest commandment is to love God holistically and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

I realize I preached on this scripture passage just a few weeks ago, as well as the parable which follows it - the good Samaritan. But, that sermon focused on the question of who our neighbor is. Who do I have to love? I'd like to focus more today on what love is and how it is expressed to my neighbor and self.

Christians believe that the greatest power in our world is the power of love. In fact, we will often equate love with God, speaking of them as one and the same. In a sermon from a few years ago, Adam Hamilton said, "God doesn't care how right we are nearly as much as God cares about how much we love", and I think recognizing that truth is key to getting through these last days before the election and the fallout afterward. We've got to shift our focus as much as we can away from who is right and who is wrong, who will win and who will lose, and toward how we are going to embody love in the world no matter what. No matter which presidential candidate you support, as a Christ-follower, you are called to love. Love first, before all other emotions, opinions, or beliefs. Simply love.

What does that love look like? One well-known description of love is found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. “If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

There is so much wisdom in those words for the time in which we are living. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice in wrong-doing but rejoices in truth. Love believes, hopes, and endures. And we are called to put love at the center of our lives.

But it’s hard to put love first. We are naturally inclined to blame and fear and one-up-manship. Only through faith in God, the source of all love, can we change. John Wesley, who developed the theology we follow as United Methodists, believed that when we begin the journey of faith, we begin a journey of transformation of the heart. We are transformed by God’s love and grace. Love grows from a heart softened by God’s love for us which leads us to live lives which reflect that love.“ A Methodist,” Wesley wrote, “is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and life”.

Our families and friends, our rivals and enemies, our country and our world need our transformed hearts right now. Regardless of who wins the election, they need to see in us - in what we say, what we do, and how we live - the power of love to overcome hate.

When we are baptized, and again when we are confirmed as members of the church, we vow “to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves”. We see evil, injustice, and oppression around us all the time, and that isn’t going to change when the election is over. Regardless of who wins, people will speak and behave in hateful, unjust ways.

Our job is to show a different way - to do the work of love. Because love isn’t just what we feel but what we do. I saw a quote on Facebook recently, though I couldn’t read the name of the person who said it. It said, “Get up off of your knees. Come out of your churches, your mosques, your temples. God can hear your prayers for peace, justice, and hope in this broken world just fine while you’re out creating peace, working for justice and giving hope to this broken world... Don’t just pray for someone to do something. Be someone who does something”.

Which brings us back to love your neighbor as yourself. If you’re not sure how to be someone who does something, if you’re not sure what to do, consider what it looks like to love yourself. First and foremost, you love yourself by meeting your own basic needs. You pay attention to eating a balanced diet of healthy food. You drink plenty of good, clean water. You exercise regularly. You make sure to pay the mortgage, so you have shelter and warmth, a place to lay your head at night. You seek out medical care both to prevent and to treat illness.

To take care of your heart and spirit, you spend time with people you love and who love you. You surround yourself with folks who are good people and inspire you toward goodness. You laugh and have fun. Perhaps you meditate or do yoga. You worship and seek out a

community of faith. You learn new things and meet new people who enrich your life. You attempt to treat yourself with kindness, compassion, and respect. As an aside, being intentional about these acts of self-love is all the more important during times of high anxiety.

If you seek to love your neighbor as yourself, then you offer all of these things to them, as well - particularly those neighbors who, for whatever reason, are unable to meet their needs themselves. Those who live in poverty. Those who are marginalized. Those who are ill. Those who are alone. You offer them food and clean water. Help them find shelter. Make sure they have access to medical care. Invite them into your circle of love or your community of faith. Treat them with the same kindness, compassion, and respect that you need yourself.

This is our work to do as is so clear in this conversation Jesus had with Peter after his resurrection from John chapter 21. Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again, Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep”.

We are not powerless in the face of this election and whatever comes next because we have access to the greatest power in the universe -love. We don't have to be paralyzed by our fear and anxiety because we are called to demonstrate in our words and our actions that love overcomes fear and hate and oppression and injustice.

The world needs to see more of Christians doing what Christians are supposed to do. And that begins with each of us. You are an agent of transformation in this world. You are chosen by God to be a living example of the gospel of love. You are the sower of seeds of hope regardless of whatever despair might come with election day.

So, go out into the world, my friends, to live out your baptismal vows. Resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of the world. Turn instead to the life-giving, transformative, hope-filled power of love.

May it be so. Amen.