

Message: "Unconditional, yet Qualified, Love"

Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" ⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ¹⁵Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

I almost got into a fight the other day with an individual who was misrepresenting God. Yes, I know, pastors aren't supposed to fight, they are against violence, but even pastors, at least this pastor, reach their limit sometimes. I was traveling in a very rural part of another state; as I drove to my destination, I saw "Elect Ammon Bundy for Governor" signs everywhere, and "Trump 2024" signs as well; there were small communities of mobile homes interspersed with a four-story mansion every now and then, all overlooking a large river; the twisty road I drove went through beautiful mountains which were interrupted by enormous gravel pits and logging compounds every now and then; it was, in short, a place of contrasts.

I was there to pick up tires that would fit my old pickup truck, which is so old they no longer make the size I need, and one of my tires is what they call a prayer tire, meaning it is the object of my prayers every time I drive that old truck. Bald, that is, to the point of showing the steel belts. So I needed replacements - and I found some in this rural area of another state. This brought me to the location of the seller, facing a barbed-wire gate with "no trespassing" signs all over the place, as well as one that said, "Smile—You're on camera." A bit intimidating. As I pulled up, the seller led me in to what felt a bit like a compound invisible from the road; odds and ends everywhere. He directed me to where the tires were, and I stopped my car there.

Those of you who have ever been involved in purchase transactions of the Craigslist style know there is a conventional dialogue which naturally occurs between seller and buyer, and we willingly engaged in that dialogue - we conversed about the age of the tires, the condition of the rims, previous vehicles upon which they were mounted, and the amount of tread left on their

carcass. You know, shooting-the-breeze sorts of conversation, working up to the epitome of deal making.

But then it happened, in the middle of a smooth conversation earmarked by marketplace discussion: he asked me THE question, the one question that could ruin what otherwise was a pleasant talk. I hate THE question for what it almost always produces - awkwardness, tension, confusion, embarrassment. What is THE question? He asked mewhat I did for a living.

Now, usually, one of two things happen. Either the person is pleasantly surprised, or uneasily annoyed. Neither is a very good response, however, from my perspective, for almost always either response reveals things of an unpleasant nature.

Now, you'd think a pleasantly surprised reaction would be a good thing, and that's what this seller had - he said, "so you're a pastor; that's great." But things went immediately downhill from there. In one or two sentences, he expressed his theology, which included stating that God hates gays, assessing the problem with our country is that they do not allow prayer in schools, mentioning something along the lines that God isn't happy with one of our political parties in particular (can you guess which one?), and various and sundry comments that had me understand he thought Christian nationalism was a good thing.

That's when the fight almost broke out; my brain was seething with angst and frustration that anyone could be so ignorant, so cold-hearted, so off-base with the faith I represent; I was angered by his comments, annoyed by his aloof manner, and incensed with his prejudice. I could feel my proverbial fist being clenched, and my posture approaching a mental pounce.

You will be relieved to know I diffused the situation immediately - by jumping in my car and peeling out of his driveway. No, no, I didn't do that, although part of me wanted to. I diffused the situation immediately by presenting to him an amazingly eloquent exhortation of proper, Jesus-shaped thinking, pointing out the great deficiencies in his conclusions that were theologically counter to God's will. No, no, I didn't do that either, although I certainly had counterpoints dancing around my brain, ready to share.

No, I didn't do any of those things in response; instead, I tried to employ the tactic advised by today's scripture which advocates showing hospitality to the stranger, or more simply loving the stranger - and I attempted to love him by listening to him. I was silent when he sought my affirmation of what he

believed, so he knew I did not agree with him; but I did not stop listening to him. When he went off on a prejudiced assessment of the "bad people out there," my only response was "we have so much work to do to get along and care for each other," which produced a rather blank stare from him; but I did not stop listening to him. We sat there and talked like this for around a half hour, with him sharing comments that made my heart ache and my head buzz, but I listened much more than spoke, for speaking in such contexts is almost always counter-productive; but more to the point, speaking in such contexts is often unnecessary, for the silence of non-reaction often speaks louder than artificially-shaped agreement; and at the end of our conversation, with the tires loaded in the back of my car, and him realizing I did not agree with him on almost anything he shared, he reached out his hand to me and said, "It was a pleasure talking to you," which I think actually meant "thanks for listening to me."

Loving often means listening past your comfort zone. We know this very well with those close to us; but the same applies towards those who are strange to us, those who are unknown to us or those with thoughts or perceptions or ideas foreign or counter to our own. Loving the stranger sometimes means giving them a platform to speak what's on their mind without shutting them down. Loving the stranger often means to listen beyond the words being shared and the message intended. Loving the stranger often means to listen to a soul struggling with inconsistencies and prejudices they have not thought about, and yet, when spoken out loud to another stranger, cannot help but invite reflection, especially with other options are lifted up in kindness rather than judgment. Loving sometimes means listening past our patience.

This is the kind of love you and I signed up for when we claimed Jesus as lord of our lives. This is the kind of love that challenges us to our very core, the kind of love rare in the world, the kind of love that listens to the person more than to the words they speak. This is the kind of love that remembers those forgotten, that enters the pain of those who suffer, that insists on truth when falsehood is so much more convenient. This is the kind of love that sets followers of Jesus apart from the world, for the sake of the world's need. And it is a love most desperately needed by the world today; as the author of Hebrews says to us today, let us never neglect to share it.