

What About Our Neighbors? – Lexi Baysinger

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” - Matthew 22:37-40

In our culture, it is easy to say that we love God. It is easy because, depending on your view of the world, God isn't directly in front of you, staring you in the face. It's easy to love God because we can pretend that God is far away in another place. And that's part of why Jesus includes the second commandment—because we can use loving God as an excuse to not engage with our neighbors. But that is only answering half the call of our lives as Christians, and outright ignoring the second commandment. But so often we just don't understand what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. So much of the time, we are at a loss to know how to love our neighbors. Jesus gives us an example of who our neighbor is in the parable of the Good Samaritan, as the Samaritan man acts as a true neighbor when he not only stops to help the man, but also says that he will pay the expense for the injured man to be healed. That is part of what it looks like to love our neighbor.

I think about the neighbors that we have started to forget in today's context. It's been over a month and Puerto Rico is still suffering with our water and power in some parts of the island. It's been almost a month since a man committed what media outlets called the “deadliest shooting in US history” and we haven't seen any response that would help prevent something like this from happening again. It is 2017 and we still do not trust women when they say that they have been sexually assaulted until a man admits to doing it. It has been over 60 years since the Civil Rights movement started and we are still trying to get the world to understand that black lives matter. Our Native American brothers and sisters have suffered since the inception of this country and continue to suffer when our national government continues to break treaties and dishonor the Native Americans' sacred lands. What about all of these neighbors? How have we forgotten our call to love them as we love ourselves?

Too often we, as Christians who live in the United States, fall prey to believing in and buying into the values of the United States, which often means taking care of ourselves before anyone else. In our individualistic society, we fall into the belief that not only am I the most important, but also that I have to do everything on my own. Both of these ideas are counter to the Gospel. Both of these ideas keep us from not only loving our neighbor, but also from fully loving God. We have become so proficient at loving ourselves that we've forgotten what it means to care about the plight of our neighbor. Now, I know that sounds harsh. It is, I'm not gonna lie, but it's also true. In our age, many people continue to deny that there is a difference in how people are

treated because of the color of their skin, the accent that they speak with, or what gender they happen to be. There is disbelief when people speak out against those in power. And yet we wonder why we are struggling with the issues that have plagued our nation for the last 60 years. We have forgotten that as Christians we are called to act completely out of love.

This gets even harder when pride starts to edge its way into our lives. There's this concept that's really popular right now called being "woke." People mostly just think that it means not only being aware of injustice, but acting to right that injustice. The negative about this concept is that when some people become woke, they start to look down on the people who aren't. They forget that they may have once been in the same shoes as the person that they are demeaning for not understanding something, and in doing this they lose sight of loving this person as they love themselves. This does not mean that we shouldn't be upset with people who refuse to understand or acknowledge injustices, but this does mean that we have to have more patience with those who are beginning to learn about the injustices that have defined this country since its creation. As Christians, we don't just get to write people off for being ignorant. When we live into the call to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, we find that we have to walk alongside people who may be considered enemies. And that's where Jesus gets us, because he also calls us to love our enemies—and that means that we don't get a free pass to dismiss someone because they are willfully ignorant about something that is important to God and to us.

When we accept that all people are our neighbors, we are tasked with caring for them as if they were our own family. We have to make sure that they have the same access and opportunity as we do. Sometimes that means giving up our seat at the table so that someone else can speak truth to a situation. Often, this means that we have to acknowledge that it may be our time to move on so that the next generation of leaders can take their place. And that's something that we continually struggle with.

Those who hold power are often too afraid to give it up to the next generation. In our age, this is partly because the next generation of leaders looks drastically different from those who are currently in power, and that scares the ones who currently hold power. But we see a good example of the passing of leadership in today's text from Deuteronomy, as Moses dies and leadership passes to Joshua. Moses could have easily given up on the Israelites several times throughout his time with them. They constantly disregarded what Moses told them and did what they wanted instead. But he didn't give up. Moses understood that he was to show this people God's love for them, and part of that meant preparing someone to lead them after Moses passed on. The text says that Joshua *was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses*. Moses, under God's direction, ensured that Joshua would have authority in the community. We also have to be better about following this model. We have to understand that passing leadership means that we also make sure that the community that is being led understands that the new leaders have our

full confidence and that they are acting with full authority. Sometimes, this is what it looks like to love our neighbor.

I'm not going to sugar coat it, living our lives this way is difficult and often exhausting. There is a reason that Moses was able to write the words,

Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.

He knew the struggle of leading and loving a group that often didn't want anything to do with what he was trying to teach them. But we find the same hope that Moses does at the end of Psalm 90, *Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands—O prosper the work of our hands.* See, our hope is not in our own power. Our hope is in the fact that God prospers the work that is so dear to him.

We are able to love God with all our hearts, soul, and mind and love our neighbor as ourselves because God has given us the ability to do so. His favor is on us when we are following these two fundamental commandments. We remember our neighbor because of God's power and we serve our neighbor best when we acknowledge that God is still active with his people. It is not until we realize that all are created in God's image and thus considered our neighbors that Christians in the US will be able to become respected in the fight against injustice in this world. May we be reminded of God's love and of the knowledge that without that love there will be no lasting change.