

Earlier this week I thought I would focus my sermon around the Matthew text and talk about the model Jesus describes for reconciling with someone who has wronged you. There is some great stuff in those verses and I was looking forward to connecting them to some of the things I have learned through my experiences with the Next Generation Leadership Initiative. I was going to talk about communication pitfalls like triangulation and pass-through communication. I was planning to highlight how the process that Jesus describes has, at its core, the goal of loving reconciliation, of restoring and healing a wounded relationship. I was going to point out that even if the steps Jesus outlines do not prove effective, if talking with the person alone first, then in the company of one or two others, and then finally with the community of faith, that the final act is to treat the person as a gentile or a tax collector. On the surface, this sounds like shunning them or treating them as an outsider. And yet when we think about how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors, he broke bread with them. He joined them at the table of love and offered them grace. That was going to be the gist of my sermon, but the spirit often moves during the week and after the week we've had, I felt compelled to focus on the Romans text instead and offer the communication stuff in an adult forum in the near future.

As I have been taking in all the news stories of this week I have been feeling more and more disturbed. Is disturbed the right word? Troubled? Agitated? Saddened? Nothing quite seems to capture the combination of frustration, outrage, sadness, weariness, worry, and just plain disbelief that seems to only get amplified week in and week out. Is anyone else feeling that way too? On top of man-made issues like threatening to deport hundreds of thousands of people who have only known life in the United States, mother nature seems to have let loose with her own fire and fury. Literally! Fires are burning more than 1 million acres all over the western half of the country forcing thousands of people to evacuate to safety and millions of people feeling the impact of smoke-filled air and ash falling from the sky. As we speak, hurricane Irma is roaring through Florida threatening to be the most destructive storm this country has ever seen. And that's just in this country.

Difficult times seem to bring out either the worst in us or the best. In moments of stress or fear, anger or anxiety, some people respond with behavior and actions that are destructive and hurtful. As people have been faced with the fear of losing everything in the wake of fires or hurricanes, stories begin to surface of people responding to their fear and stress with desperate actions. Like the man at a gas station in Miami who pulled a gun and began to threaten other drivers waiting in line to fill up. Looters in St. Marten have taken to the streets with guns and machetes. But for every incidence of violence, there are more and more stories people being good to each other.

There is a wonderful quote of Mr. Rogers that goes ‘When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” This week as I have been pondering this sermon while taking in the news of the week and especially the last day or two, I have had the words from Romans in my head. “Don’t be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other.” And so, while Mrs. Rogers encouraged young Fred to look for the helpers, I have been looking for love in the events of this week. I was especially touched by a story that I’m sure many of you saw or read about. Pam Brekke from Orlando, Florida was desperately seeking a generator. Her father relies on supplemental oxygen to reduce the strain on his failing heart. With the threat of a possible power outage during the storm, acquiring a generator was at the top of Pam’s priority list. But the generators were selling out quickly and were hard to come by. Pam learned that a Lowe’s store located 30 miles from her had received an unexpected shipment of generators. She dropped what she was doing at work and drove to the store. But when she arrived she discovered dozens of people already in line for the generators and she watched as each person in front of her was given a generator until the person in front of her in line was given the very last one.

The stress and the fear and the sense of helplessness was too much and Pam broke down into tears. Ramon Santiago, one of the people who had received a generator, saw her and noticed her crying. He took the time to come over to hear and ask in broken English what was wrong. When he learned about Pam’s father, he didn’t hesitate to put his generator in her cart. Ramon sacrificed the comfort of his own family

for the safety of a stranger. I believe this is the type of love that Paul is writing about in his letter to the early church in Rome. Love that treats strangers like family and looks out for those who are vulnerable and hurting. This love is more than a feeling. In the words of the Rev. Rachel Stackhouse, “Love is the essence of discipleship, the basis for transformation. That love involves all we are and do, individually and as faith communities every day.”<sup>1</sup> Love is the essence of discipleship, the basis for transformation. To love one another is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus. To love your neighbor is the core of the Christian faith. As Paul writes to this young church, this command to love each other is not an option, but an obligation. Unlike a financial debt or obligation, loving one another is an obligation that never ends. We don’t pay off the balance somehow and are then free to stop loving our neighbor. There isn’t a goal of how many loving acts we should do in order to fulfil this obligation. This love of neighbor is a way of being that changes us and transforms us and has the potential to change and transform the world around us.

While the news often focuses on the disasters and the violence, we know that people are inviting one another to a table of love every hour of every day. And yet, this way of being can be viewed as naïve especially when the call to love goes beyond offering a generator to a stranger in a store. When it informs the way we write and enforce the laws; when love of neighbor is the lens through which evaluate foreign and domestic policies; when loving our neighbor means responding to hate not with violence but with love, that’s when it gets real. That is when we truly put our faith into action and proclaim that we believe in a better way.

Jagmeet Singh, a Canadian politician, and a follower of the Sikh faith, was verbally attacked during a campaign event this past week. The woman yelling in his face seemed to think he was Muslim and was in his face shouting Islamophobic comments about Sharia law and his support of the Muslim brotherhood. Rather than argue with her or have her forcibly removed, Singh spoke to the people gathered

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Stackhouse, “Romans 13:8-14,” in *Feasting on the Word*, vol. 4, Year A (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 42.

saying, "What do we believe in? We believe in love and courage." As she continued her aggressive ranting, Singh stayed with the message of love. We are not going to be intimidated by hatred, "Let's show someone how we treat someone with love." He looked at the woman and said "We welcome you, we welcome you, we love you, we support you, and we love you. Everyone in this room loves you and we believe in your rights. As she continued to yell Singh assured the people gathered "It's ok. We're not worried about this. Let her speak." After about 4 minutes, the woman left. Singh encouraged the crowd that when we are faced with hate, we are to respond with love and courage.<sup>2</sup>

Love and courage seem like just what we need right now. May we have the courage to love as Jesus loved. May we have the courage to show love in the face of our own fears and worries. May we have the courage to love even when the neighbor we are loving is throwing hate right back at us. Courageous love will get us through difficult times and more importantly, courageous love protects and cares for those whose lives and wellbeing are being threatened. Maybe the Beatles got it right. Maybe love is all we need. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-globally/video-canadian-sikh-politician-handles-racist-female-heckler-with-love-and-courage/>