

Love Always Wins

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Preaching on:

Matthew 22:33–40

This morning I'm continuing with my closing "fundamentals" of Christianity sermon series. We began last week with opportunity and repentance. And we discovered that repentance is not about feeling guilty to avoid a bad ending in hell. It's about seizing the always present but always somewhat elusive opportunity to realign myself and my values with the Kingdom of God. What does that look like exactly? Well, that's what we're talking about this week: love and justice. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Bonnie and I were at a street fair this weekend. And one of the attractions was a tent from an Evangelical Bible church. They had a lot of volunteers, and they were bumping with activity. Inside their tent, people were reading the Bible, praying, and (I assume) getting saved. I was handed a tract as I walked past, and the man who handed it to me told me it was very important and asked me to make sure that I read it. There was a picture of hellfire on it. And it assured me that I am sinner (no

surprise there). And it told me that because I am a sinner, and because there is nothing I can do to earn God's forgiveness, and because no amount of good deeds could ever make up for what a wretch I am, my only choice is to accept Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross for my sins by praying the prayer on the back of the tract.

The church had a lot of literature out on their tables about Christianity. There were a lot of quotes from the Bible. I mean a lot. Every other sentence was backed up with chapter and verse proof. But in all that literature, there was not one mention of loving your neighbors as you love yourself. Which seems funny because Jesus said there is no greater commandment (Mark 12:31). There was also not one mention of treating others the way you want to be treated (Luke 6:31). Not one mention of loving your enemies (Matthew 5:44). Not one mention of selling everything you have and giving the proceeds to the poor (Matthew 19:21). Not one mention of the sermon on the mount—that the poor and the mourning and the peacemakers are now blessed (Matthew 5:1-12). Not one mention of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, or visiting the prisoners (Matthew 25:31-46).

It makes you wonder why Jesus bothered wasting his time telling us anything about love, or about how to treat others, or about how to treat the most vulnerable, if none of it matters enough to even make it into the brochure. Jesus definitely came to teach us about grace, and faith, and salvation. But he taught us about grace, and faith, and salvation manifested through love and justice in this world. The Evangelical and fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity distorts Christianity by putting grace so far ahead of works that works become irrelevant, by making it seem possible that faith and salvation can exist outside of love and relationships in this world.

It's like trying to tell people that it's not food that they need, it's nutrition. Well, we do need nutrition, but how are you going to get it without the food? We need salvation, we need grace, sure, but how are we going to get it without Jesus' main course—love, and the right relationships among people that love demands?

A few tents down from the Evangelicals there was a United Methodist Church. They had a smattering of people around their tent—nothing too exciting. The brochures on their table were for a ministry they run for people with dementia. Every week volunteers run an afternoon program so the caregivers of the folks with dementia can take a break for a couple of hours.

If the important thing is individual salvation (going to heaven when you die) through a particular belief (in Jesus on the cross) through a particular act of piety (a prayer), then this program for dementia patients and their exhausted caregivers doesn't matter, does it? In fact, nothing really matters. This world doesn't matter. And I don't matter. My character, my effort, my relationships, my suffering, my victories, my compassion, my sacrifices, none of it really matters.

But when we realize that the important thing is love and how we express and organize and live out that love in the world, then suddenly a humble, small-town program for dementia patients held in the

basement of a little rundown church IS the Kingdom of God being born upon the earth. It's not about *me* getting saved. It's not about Jesus, my personal Lord and savior. It's about universal salvation, Jesus the savior of the world, and us, his disciples who he has called to take up our crosses and follow him (Matthew 16:24). The disciples didn't just believe in Jesus. They followed him! They did what he said, lived as he lived, and worked with him to love others and make justice in the world far from the centers of power and influence. That was the announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God. That was good news to the poor. And that's what Jesus is still asking us for.

There's an old joke: A man prayed fervently every week to win the lottery. Week after week would go by, and he'd never win. He began to lose faith, and so he prayed to God one last time, "God, you told me that anything I prayed for I would get. And you know how hard I have prayed! And you know how much I believe! And you know how much I need this money, and the good I'll do with it! So, you answer me now: Why, after all this time, have I still not won that lottery?" And so powerful was the man's prayer that the heavens parted, and God appeared above him on a cloud. And God looked down upon him and said, "Schmuck! You still have to buy a ticket!"

To translate this joke back into our sermon, grace and salvation without action are nothing more than ideas—just disembodied concepts. In order to actually take shape in your life, in our world, in order to become real, action must be taken. When we go out and love people, when we go out to make the world a better place, when we go out to make our society and our culture more fair and more kind, the grace that we all so desperately need begins to take on real form.

Love is God's primary force. So much so, that the Bible tells us that God IS love (1 John 4:8). When the Apostle Paul talks about virtues, he tells us that the greatest virtue—greater even than faith—is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). And in our scripture reading this morning Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is love, and that loving God and loving your neighbor are inseparable. "When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Faith, grace, salvation—all wonderful things, all true, but none of them can be put in front of love, and all of them must be understood through love. And love, as the Bible and Jesus discuss it, is not an emotion. It's a way of being in right relationship to your neighbors and of doing no harm—even to your enemies or to those who persecute you. This is the very love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. And that love saves us not when we accept it, but when we emulate it: Take up your crosses and follow me.

There are a lot of different visions for justice in this world. Jesus' vision is pretty simple to understand, but sometimes hard to follow. Abusers will stop their abuse. Violence will never be justified. Those with too much will reduce themselves down to the right size while ensuring that those without enough are cared for. We will share openly with one another. When we are in conflict, we will forgive and reconcile. We will confront sin and injustice boldly, and we will do it with humility, never thinking ourselves better than others. We will not judge. We will allow the poor and the marginalized among us to become our

leaders and teachers. We will all sit at the table together without regard for power or status, never seeking advantage for ourselves over another. We will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit the prisoners. We will give everything we have, even our lives, to bringing this vision and these values into the world. Simple, right? But can we do this all on our own?

No. You can't do it on your own. Nobody can. But that's OK. Because the main course of love is always served by God with a garnish of grace. They go together like mashed potatoes and gravy. The Evangelicals and the fundamentalists are right about one thing, for sure. We live in a world that has convinced itself that the most important things in life are all things that I can earn for myself through hard work, or talent, or brash, narcissistic bullying, or whatever it may be. And so next week, I'm going to be talking about grace, about how important it is, and what it tells us about ourselves and spirituality.

In the meantime, carry Jesus' vision for justice in this world in your heart this week and let it work on you: "Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself." And ask yourself: What does it mean to love God with everything? Is there anything in my life that's getting in between me and my love of God? What does it mean to love my neighbor as I love myself? Do I love myself? What would the world look like if love always came first? What can I offer to my neighbors that make the Kingdom of God a little more real in the world? And remember: Love always wins (1 Corinthians 13:8), but only if you're willing to buy a ticket!