

“When Love Isn’t Simple”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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When Martin Luther hammered the 95 theses on the doors of the church as a way to reform the Christian church, he purposely did so on All Hallow’s Eve– the day before All Saints’ Day, when the church commemorated the dead– because he knew the church would be full and his ideas would get lots of attention. In years since, what we now call Halloween has lost its spiritual association. Not only that, some denominations and sects of Christianity forbid their children to go trick-or-treating, saying that the holiday glorifies demons and spirits that aren’t of God. I would advise such demons and spirits only have power if you give it to them, so go ahead and enjoy the chocolate and continue loving God and loving neighbor.

While around here I don’t really see attitudes that drastic, when the interfaith clergy group was emailing to find a time to plan our community Thanksgiving service, the Episcopalians suggested 7 pm on October 31.

But to me, Halloween as a holiday embodies the teachings of our faith on loving your neighbor. Opening your door to a stranger? The letter to the Hebrews advises, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained entertaining angels without knowing it.” Welcoming children? Jesus took a child in his arms and said, “whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.” Sharing resources? Jesus also said, “If a child asks for a fish, will you give them a snake?” There was even the year that our pumpkin got stolen by some teenage kids’ prank. Even though we could see it on our Ring camera, the person in our family who wanted to publicly shame these teens on social media went through a process of thinking through it and choosing instead to practice grace. “If anyone wants to take your shirt, give them your cloak as well” Jesus taught.

It’s easy to be this way one day a year, especially when candy sweetens the deal. But 365 days a year? That is so much more of a stretch. Look at us: Yet again lax gun policy has allowed a troubled soul in crisis to destroy lives in a small town where pretty much everyone is a neighbor. Forget about Democrats and Republicans working together; how many tries did it take before Republicans could finally agree on a Speaker of the House? And in a neighborhood much further away, war in the Middle East is destroying any kind of hope of a future where neighbors can live together in peace.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On this Reformation Sunday, when we remember how hard the Reformers worked to get the church to take scripture seriously, and to empower the laity to read it and understand it for themselves, in their own languages, rather than rely on priests to hold the keys to some secret kind of knowledge, these

words of scripture are ones for **every** Christian to learn and to know, just as they were already words that every Jew from Jesus' time would have known.

But knowing doesn't make it simple.

Yesterday, in the New York Times¹, a former soldier for the Israel Defense Force who had come from a Modern Orthodox, settler family, described an invasion of Gaza that happened in 2014, a smaller scale version of what is happening today, after three Israeli teenagers had been killed by Hamas terrorists. Benzion Sanders, the veteran who wrote the article, discussed how as a soldier he engaged in street-by-street combat in a post-apocalyptic zone of bombed out buildings. The faces of women and children, who were collateral damage as his unit pursued the enemy, tugged at his conscience. Some of his own comrades were killed, and of course that tugged at him too. Still, he remembered writing on a slip of paper, "*I think it could be worth it, as long as we decisively eliminate the threat.*"

"But in the years since," this former soldier writes, "Hamas has only grown stronger, despite our sacrifices and despite the death and destruction we had wrought on Gaza. These periodic episodes of killing and destruction, which Israeli commentators and politicians cynically call '[mowing the lawn](#),' have been a price Israel was willing to pay to avoid being pushed toward a two-state solution. We chose to 'manage' the conflict through a combination of brute force and economic incentives, instead of working to solve it by ending our perpetual occupation of Palestinian territory." In his article, he said he believes in Israel's right to and necessity for self-defense. But at the same time, he has come to believe that "Palestinian terror can be defeated only by creating Palestinian hope."

Loving your neighbor can be so difficult when your neighbor has blood on their hands. And I humbly admit that sharing the words I just did are easy for me when they are someone else's words, and when no one I directly love has been killed or taken hostage. Quite the opposite—, one of the things my daughter said at the end of a particularly lovely day in town yesterday is, "I love my neighborhood. I love that I have friends here. I think my home is a great place to live."

I realize in these times just what a privilege it is to hear your child say this, and I don't take it for granted. But really, it should not be a privilege, but a right for every child to feel such safety and belonging and love in their neighborhood. And the truth is, we don't have to travel nearly as far as Israel or Palestine to see that there are children who do not feel safe *or* loved by their neighbors. We can even notice in our own community if we truly try to know our neighbors and be willing to hear and hold their pain that not everyone feels safe or loved.

Unfortunately, many Christians think that Jesus invented the idea of loving your neighbor as yourself. But as our lectionary text shows us, this idea comes straight out of the Jewish Torah. Not only that, but biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine, who is Jewish and actually one of the country's best scholars on the *New Testament*, points out that "Leviticus 19 goes on to say that

¹ BenZion Sanders, "I Fought for the I.D.F. in Gaza. It Made Me Fight for Peace." in *The New York Times*, October 28, 2023.

you have to love the stranger who dwells among you because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Jews have the category of neighbor and the category of stranger, but they are commanded to love the stranger too.” The shortened version of the text that Jesus shares leaves out the part about the stranger– but we as well need to figure out a love like that, too.

The Rev. Traci Blackmon is a denominational leader for the United Church of Christ and before that, as Black minister from St. Louis, MO, she became known nationally through her leadership and activism for racial justice as a chaplain during the Ferguson marches. Last week, she posted an interesting story. She was driving through her Midwestern neighborhood, but on a street she rarely uses. There was a white woman sitting on a chair, with a large sign printed in big red letters: “Drive Through Prayer.” Rev. Blackmon drove... right on past. But then, she said, “The Spirit drew me back to her. So I yielded and turned around.” She stopped the car and asked for a prayer. The woman’s name was Mary. Mary smiled big, then gestured to a group of 6 men and four women gathered on the lawn down the street– some sort of evangelism team. “Those folks will pray for you,” Mary cheerfully said.

Rev. Blackmon said to Mary, “No. I was not drawn to them. I was drawn to you. I want *you* to pray for me.”

Mary said, “But I’m not good at it.”

“You don’t have to be good. You just have to be sincere. Are you sincere, Mary?”

“Oh yes, I’m sincere.”

Rev. Blackmon grabbed Mary’s hands, “Then pray for me, please.”

Mary went on to offer a beautifully bumbling and strained prayer, then looked up at Rev. Blackmon as if to ask with her eyes if the prayer was ok.

Rev. Blackmon said, “Mary. Thank you so much for praying for me. You’ve brought me to tears and prayed for just what I needed.”

Mary responded, “Really? Because that was terrifying for me!”

“Yes,” Blackmon said, “That was perfect. I’m so glad I turned around. Now, may I pray for you?”

“Oh yes, please.” Mary said. And Rev. Blackmon went on to also pray an equally bumbling and strained prayer for Mary and her ministry. Then, they took a selfie.

Looking at the picture, if I were one to make assumptions about things, I can imagine that Mary’s church is likely conservative, and I know for certain that Rev. Blackmon has stood boldly for a number of progressive ideas. During the events of Ferguson, they likely prayed for different outcomes. But I shouldn’t make assumptions. Because what truly matters, is that the Spirit drew a woman back to pray with another woman. To act like a neighbor– even when that neighbor is a stranger. To join hands in prayer– even though it was terrifying to at least one and maybe even both of them.

When is the last time we have been willing to offer or to receive neighborliness in such a bold and daring way?

I know I have spoken a lot about loving neighbor, and I haven’t said anything about loving God. Jesus said that both are the greatest commandments. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,

and with all your might.” These words from Deuteronomy, also known as the Shema— which is Hebrew for “hear”— are inscribed on the doors and hearts of Jews throughout time. But for some of us, loving God may be *even* harder than loving our neighbor. Love them or loathe them, at least our neighbors are people we can see and grasp hands with, for better or worse.

But I think learning how to grasp our neighbor in love is key to how we can love God. The two go hand in hand. Remember the wheel of Dorotheos of Gaza: “See! This is the very nature of love. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbor. If we were to love God more, we should be closer to God, and through love of God we should be more united in love to our neighbor; and the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God.” ²

Ending a sermon on Reformation Sunday with a quote from a saint of the early Roman Catholic Church probably isn’t the tone that Martin Luther strived so hard for. But on this Reformation Sunday, I would rather focus on what draws us together rather than distinguishes us, one from another. Today I would pray this: that we re-form our love. That we re-form our concepts of what it means to be a good neighbor. That we re-form the divisions in our minds that pit God’s people against one another. That we re-form notions of what feels comfortable, in order to commit bold acts of love and neighborliness. That we re-form the world, so that each child has a loving neighborhood to grow and to thrive. Is it simple? Absolutely not. But is it work the Spirit draws us to practice? I believe so.

² Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*