

Introduction

Just so I know what I'm working with this morning... how many of you have ever heard a sermon on love? How many of those sermons were **not** at a wedding? How many of you think that it is a good idea to love other people?

Apparently Jesus did, too. In fact, He told His disciples that their love for each other would be the visible evidence of their being His disciples (John 13:35). Jesus meant for our love to be the defining reality of our life as a community. Because, if you think about it, if we can't figure out how to love each other we don't have a whole lot to offer a sinful and broken world.

We do that pretty well at Trinity. We had visitors last week who had brought friends with them who were moving to Thomasville. They brought their friends because they wanted to introduce them to the one of the congregations with the best Christian community in the city. Actually, they said the congregation with the best Christian community in the city (but I didn't want you to get all puffed up).

We show our love in very practical ways:

Hospitality: lots of us open our homes to each other on a regular basis for small groups, social gatherings, Vestry meetings. And we dream of opening our church home, our Parish Hall, to our new neighborhood (more about that later).

Welcoming visitors: it would be hard to worship at Trinity and sneak out without being greeted. I would hope that every visitor leaves with 7 touches and 2 names.

Inclusion: we have a bunch of folks with the gift of scouring the periphery and bringing people in; our sheep dogs.

Crisis: one of the most extraordinary ways this congregation expresses love is by caring for each other in crisis or grief. We want no one to be left alone when they are hurting, even if all we can do is sit in the hospital waiting room and pray. We will come in pairs, in waves or in droves. But we will come.

Celebrating: the only thing we do better than caring for each other in crisis. I've never seen a congregation with a greater capacity for celebration. We have weddings that have receptions and receptions that have follow up cookouts. We eat together as often as Baptists.

Now as clergy we are not that great at loving (with some remarkable exceptions – most of them female). Somewhere along the line we get the idea that being a pastor is a profession. Through bad modeling, bad teaching and painful experiences (as if love never hurts) we are convinced that we need to keep a professional distance. But that would make us professional lovers. Our culture has a name for professional lovers besides "pastor." Real love can't be professionalized. Managing an organization, perhaps. Counseling, listening, leadership, perhaps. But not love. Love is full of risk and sometimes pain. It can never have professional distance.

Trinity has drawn me in. I want to learn to love this community well, to risk and to care and to be with you out of a deep affection. I want us to shine as a community of love and so prove to be Jesus' disciples.

Now, that's half the picture from today's readings. While are we to love each other, we are also to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But who is our neighbor? That's the same question the lawyer in Luke 10 asked that prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. But hold that thought. Leviticus gives us a glimpse into our neighbors. They are the poor and the sojourner (19:10); those with resources worth stealing (19:11-13); the hired servant (19:13); the deaf, the blind, the poor and the great (19:14,15). In other words, our neighbor is everyone. But there is a special emphasis on the stranger and the dispossessed; those who are different and in need.

When Jesus told the parable of the Samaritan to answer the lawyer's question, He turned the designation "neighbor" on its head. The lawyer wanted to find out the limits of love. Jesus designated "neighbor" as the loving person. It was the Samaritan that risked his life. It was the Samaritan that poured expensive oil on the victim's wounds. It was the Samaritan that promised to pay for the victim's care. The neighbor was the one who proactively showed sacrificial love.

This is probably our growing edge.

Getting to know our neighbors. We believe that God has called us to this particular place in Thomasville purposefully. So we need to start getting to know the folks around us. Through prayer walks and barbeques, Frisbee on the lawn and tea in the parlor, we need to introduce ourselves to folks on both sides of the tracks.

Embracing those who are different. As we get to know our neighbors, we are going to discover a rich tapestry of community diversity. We will meet the poor, the great and the sojourner; the hired servant, the deaf and the blind. We will meet folks who are like us, and folks with whom we share almost nothing in common. Loving our neighbor means embracing those who are different, making room for them at our table and in our hearts. It means welcoming the hungry child who breaks the rules of propriety and takes 3 pieces of fried chicken at the parish dinner because he's not sure when he will have another good meal.

Discerning our "good works" (Eph. 2:10). While God is infinite, we are finite. We have limited resources. So we will never be able to do everything that we might want to do. So we need to discern the good works that God has already prepared for us to walk in. I believe that each congregation has a unique calling. We need to continue to discern ours and to live into it.

Risking real love and real relationship. There are no guarantees when it comes to loving folks. In the midst of our call to love our neighbor, there will be plenty of disappointing moments. We will get used by people who grab resources while shunning relationship. We will be misunderstood; and we will misunderstand. We will have our prejudices unearthed. But what's the alternative? Do we really want to put a fence up around our property or our hearts? Do we really want to try to love from a distance without real engagement? I say, "Let's dive in and see what God does."

Conclusion

One last thought. We have been talking this morning about the second greatest commandment. We can only live into that one to the extent that we are fulfilling the first one, to love the Lord with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. We are looking to be a community of supernatural love, a love that flows not from ourselves but from the source of all love.