Practice Neighbor Love
1 John 3:11-18
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Where does one even begin to preach, or to proclaim God's good news, after a week like this past week?

How do you lament and grieve the truths that have come to light – how do you acknowledge the *murders* of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and the many more that weren't captured on film – and still come to a place where we are expected to say God's love is active and present in the world today?

How does a person proclaim God's love is desired equally for all, while still letting our words, actions, policies, elected officials, salaries, and expectations give preference and privilege to those with whiter skin?

And for those who would even begin to bemoan the looting, rioting, anger, and violence that has been seen the past few nights across this nation – no, these are not the desired responses – but when you've been shown by your country that your life is expendable because of the color of your skin, and when the nation hasn't heard your cries of peaceful protest – your knee taking or your fist raising – how do you expect people to respond? If you haven't lived that fear, you can't answer that question. And if you're more angry about the rioting than you are the unchecked murders of people of color at the hands of government employees, or the shotguns of suburban vigilantes, then you may need to check your own privilege.

Your response to this past week may be to simply say, "I just don't understand." And you're probably right, most of us don't. But we can't just sit and rest in our privilege, in our whiteness, in our armchairs of power while the nation burns around us. If we believe the Gospel message, if we believe in the power of God in Jesus Christ, if our prayers are authentic, if we are empowered by the Spirit, we cannot continue to sit quietly or idly as the structure of racism continues to take the lives of our brothers and sisters, of our neighbors and friends, of our co-workers and community partners, or of any person, near or far, brown or black, male or female, young or old … the promise of God is not a silent promise. It is proclaimed with stripes on its back, with nails in its hands, with personal suffering for the life of the other, and is bold enough to proclaim its truth to the world – publicly, vehemently, and without abandon.

Generally, today is one of our greatest days of celebration in the life of the church. Today is the day we celebrate Pentecost Sunday – it's the birthday of the church – it's a time to remember our origin as a people gifted to proclaim God's glory and Christ's love for all people. And yet, I

am struck with tempered passion, as I mourn that in 2,000 years, we still haven't figured out what it means to proclaim God's glory and Christ's love for **all** people.

Sadly, I think we, especially as Westernized and American Christians, like to maintain our personal power over others in the world. We enjoy the ability to act, not as "mini-Christs," or "Christ-like," but as "mini-saviors," or "savior-like." We enjoy the thrill of philanthropic support that lets us be the "needed" one for another's well-being. We love to pitch in to offer temporary provisions, because it means we are the ones hailed as the savior, and we get to maintain the power. We like to be the mother wolf, who is sought by the cubs for sustenance. There's a sick and twisted power-grab that give us the feels when we get to do for others what we believe they are incapable of doing for themselves.

It's this kind of self-serving prophecy that says, love us for how great we are at displaying God's love to you … but it's really an intentional, or unintentional veiled attempt to be the unexpendable – the one who is best, most important, or savior-like. And what happens when we set *ourselves* up as unexpendable? It makes the other, those we believe need our help, nothing more than people in need of what we have to offer. *They* become the expendables.

This is what our nation has done to people color ever since we first brought them over on boats, or when we took over their indigenous homeland. We didn't give people jobs, unless we had control over their jobs. We didn't provide education, unless we dictated what they were able to learn. We didn't give people loans, unless we had control over the terms of the loan. We – as the white dominant culture – put ourselves in the place of the savior. And yes, when I look back at the history of American Christianity, I think the church is complicit in this work.

Among the many problems this presents, there is one foundational problem for us as the church. The Biblical text proclaims there is a Savior, *and that we are not him*. We are called to proclaim the glory of God, to proclaim that all people were made in the image of God … we are not called to *be* God, nor are we told that it is in *our* image that others should find normativity or created identity.

Last week, we began a new worship series that asks the question, "what does it mean to be the church?" In today's world, in our cultural and societal climate today, and in the midst of a global pandemic, how do we claim our calling from God to be the church? Honestly, I don't know that I have all the answers for these questions … if anything, I have found myself asking *more* questions. But together, I think they are questions worth asking, and answers worth pursuing.

Before we get to our text in 1 John 3, I want to glean just a bit of wisdom from Acts 2. The text in Acts 2 tells us the story of Pentecost – how the Spirit interrupted a closed door gathering of the disciples, filling them with the Spirit and giving them the ability to proclaim the glory of God in a variety languages. Having been gifted by the Spirit, they were driven from their shut off space out into the community, and there, they proclaimed God's deeds of power in the native tongue of all who had gathered.

Peter then raises his voice and addresses everyone in that unexpected community uprising that the Spirit had formed. And in quoting the prophet Joel, Peter says, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. … May everyone know that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus who was crucified.” When Peter finishes his sermon, many who heard what he had to say asked the question, “What do we need to do?” … AKA, what’s the appropriate response to this good news you have proclaimed?

Peter says, “Repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins might be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Spirit.” … and Peter continues, “For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” – which, the Biblical text makes pretty clear is all people. God offers this promise for all people who were created in the image of God, which is … well, all people. Humanity was created in the image of God, and thus, all of humanity is to whom the promise of God is offered.

So the first question I find myself asking is, “Do I believe that every person is called to receive God’s promise?” Plainly, do I believe the Biblical text, which says God’s promise is intended for all persons? This is the Biblical claim, and is then the right claim for us as Christians – to believe that our mission is to make God’s promise – God’s love – known for everyone.

The second question I then find myself asking is, “What does it mean to make God’s promise known – God’s love proclaimed – for all people?”

If Peter is echoing the prophet, and proclaiming that the Spirit will pour out onto all people, and that our call in accepting this Spirit is to repent of our failures in the past, and to live as though this promise is declared for all people in the future, how does that affect the way I live? How does that affect the way I treat others? How does that affect my own words, my own actions, my own witness?

And here I find 1 John 3 offers some timely teaching.

Verse 11 begins, “For this is the message you have heard from the beginning.” This is not a new message. This is not something that Christ made up when he became the incarnate one. This is not something Paul created in his teachings to the early church. This is how God created us from the beginning, “*that we should love one another*.” *That we should love one another.* How do we know this instruction goes back to the *very* beginning, because verse 12 references Cain and Abel, who are about as far back as you can go in the history of our faith.

We then have this very clear distinction made that, from the beginning, declares life and death as the only two options. There is love, or there is hatred. There is life, or there is death. Life and love are made to stand in opposition to hatred and death. If you do not love, then you abide in death. If you have hatred for another, you are synonymous with a murderer. And murderers do not have eternal life abiding within them, because death and love – hatred and life – are like oil and water. They do not mix.

But this is not just any love that is instructed. This is not a continuum of love that is being set up, that starts as a little bit of love mixed with a little bit of hatred, then turns to a good amount of love with just an inkling of hatred, that then turns to pure and deep love with no hatred … no, there is either love, or there is hatred. There is life, or there is death. The author makes it clear, there is no in between.

The love that is instructed is a very nuanced love – it's a very distinct love – it's love that is modeled by God in Christ. It is love that lays itself down for the well-being of another – and not just any other – not just the other you choose – but every other. "How does God's love abide in anyone who refuses to help any other in need?"

And I get that this question in verse 17 sets up a really challenging concept for the philanthropic mindset and for the "savior-mentality" of the church. We hear this call to "help others in need," and so we start to look for those in need. Sadly, we've perverted this call of the gospel text. The invitation of this text is *not* to look at others in this world as if they are needy people who are in desperate want of our help. And yet, that is how we often define others – especially in the church. We call entire subsets of the community by their needs, as if it is their needs that define them: we call them "home-less," "low-income," "poor," or "un-employed." Instead of seeing them as equals, who have as much to offer the church and the world, we treat them as if their only purpose in life is our salvific and life-giving presence.

No wonder racism is still alive in American: we've been raised with this white-savior mentality, that sadly in the church is birthed in youth-run mission trips, and food banks, and home-less shelters – services that serve an unequally large number of people of color, who we are (intentionally or unintentionally) taught will always be at the receiving end of our help. Instead of offering an invitation for us to join together in the Body of Christ – in the work of the church and inviting people to share in the witnessing of God's love, we treat others as if they will never be better than recipients of someone else's wealth.

Rev. Michael Mather says this is problematic for the church. In his book, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything,* he offers, "the need to move away from trying to help or fix people is more than a practical problem. It's a spiritual problem, too."[i] Instead of looking at others like Peter defines at Pentecost, as part of the created humanity who has been gifted with the Spirit … as people who are promised God's promise … we see others as those who need *our* saving. Instead of proclaiming God's salvation in Christ for all people, and thus letting each person live into their full calling as gifted members of a shared community, we look at others as if they are best in *subservient* roles, so that we can maintain our *saving* role.

This is the most skewed vision of God's selfless love, exemplified in Christ. What we are taught through divine demonstration is mutual love: it's self-giving love; it's communal love – it benefits everyone equally. What we have seen in American history, and is still present today, is self-serving love: it's prideful love; it's power-hungry love – it benefits some at the expense of others.

Giving someone just enough to get by, but not ensuring their full well-being … that's not life, that's death. Giving someone a predatory loan … that's not life, that's death. Ensuring your well-being, but not your neighbors … that's not life, that's death. Caring more about property value than affordable housing … that's not life, that's death. Caring more about your child's educational success than the rest of the children who live in your community … that's not life, that's death. Sitting silently while people of color are treated as expendable to society … that's not life, that's death. … It may not be your life that's relegated as expendable, but 1 John makes it very clear, you're either for life, or death. There is room in between.

Without question, I am grateful that this church feeds the hungry. Your motivation to start Open Table 10 years ago, to show up month after month to feed the Carptenter's Shelter residents, your countless dollars given to ALIVE, and Rising Hope, and your willingness to show up to food distributions … it's all great work. I am proud of the way you have continued to show up in the midst of a pandemic to give food to those who need food. We raised nearly $4,000 just last week for the food distribution. It was a glimpse of God's love … but if we think that giving away food is all it takes to be the presence of God's love in the world, we're not paying attention to the pain of the world. If we think that giving clothes to those who need clean clothes is all it takes to make a difference, we're sorely mistaken.

The Spirit was not sent to create a church that would stay closed in its own room, protecting itself. The church was sent by the gifted Spirit into the world to be a witness to the self-giving love of God in Jesus Christ, that we might get out from behind the comfort of our own safe spaces to proclaim God's love for all people – God's equal desire for all people – God's eternal promise for all people. And our work as a church is not over when everyone has food, or when everyone has a house. No, our work as the church is over when all people are able to live into their fullest as God's created humanity. Our work as the church is over when we have chosen life for all people over death for any people. Our work as the church is over when our brothers and sisters of color don't have to give the "talk" to their children about interactions with police. Our work as the church is over when the color of one's skin is not the most determinative statistic about life expectancy, job salary, incarceration, or educational level.

Come to think of it … perhaps we should be celebrating Pentecost more fervently, because I know we can't do this on our own. I know it's hard work. But don't mistake it – the Spirit isn't sent to make us comfortable. The Spirit isn't sent to pat us on the back for the work that we've already done. The Spirit isn't sent to help us continue to subjugate and divide humanity for our own well-being. The Spirit is sent to make clear the truth, to break down our moral righteousness that says we've got it all figured out, and to drive us out into the world to proclaim not our saving capabilities – not our privilege and prestige – not or insincere apologies for the world left to us by our fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, and beyond … The Spirit is sent that we might break down any barrier, any power, any divide that separates any person from true life and mutual love. The Spirit is sent that we might go forth and acknowledge even the places in our own lives that continue to support the systemic structures of racism in this nation and in this world. And yes, like life and death, like love and hatred, there

too is racist and anti-racist. It is not enough to be silent. It's one or the other – "Whoever does not love abides in death."

Verse 18 is our close out, as it proclaims, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." If we are living into God's vision for creation, if we are filled with the love of God in Jesus Christ, we do not sit idly by as the world burns around us. We show up. We act up. We work up. We use every bit of influence, strength, passion, and desire God has given us to be change agents in this world.

My church - this work starts with you. This work starts with me. It starts with our own heavy lifting to understand why the world is the way it is today. It starts with our naming our own complacency with the unequal society that we live in. Peter says, "repent, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is yours, it is for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

May our vision of the Kingdom align with the promise of God. For the glory of God, may we chose life over death. Love over hatred. In God's name, may it be so.

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[i] Michael Mather. Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.