

Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself  
Sermon at Grace Baptist Church, Statesville, NC on June 27, 2021  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord. Amen.

The theme of this Season of Grace is Rebuilding Community. Steve's sermon series has been elaborating on this theme of Rebuilding Community - Can these Bones Live?, God is a Community, Thankfulness in Community and the Idolatry of the Perfect Church, Recovering Our Balance, and last week They Shared All Things in Common: A Look at the Early Church.

Following on that theme of rebuilding community, I was asked to speak to you this morning on the subject of Being An Ally.

My texts for this message are Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-19 and Mark 12: 28-31, as Marsha read for us. "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

Right up front, let me admit to you freely and openly, my brothers and sisters, that *I* have not at all times and in all places been successful in loving my neighbor as myself – I want to get that acknowledgment out of the way *right here at the beginning*. I have sinned by omission and commission and failed in myriad ways of which I am aware, and am certain there have been times when

I was unaware. I admit that there have probably been times when - figuratively - like Saul, I stood by and held the cloaks for those who were stoning Stephen.

I can use reminders from time to time in order to be more intentional about living into this Great Commandment. So, please, consider my words this morning to be such a gentle reminder to you.

What does this Great Commandment call us all to do? To love our neighbors as ourselves. What does that love look like? Who are our neighbors? Who are the strangers we should love? And what does it mean that we are to love them as we love ourselves?

There is a story in the Jewish Talmud about Hillel, a great teacher who lived about the same time of Jesus. A man came to Hillel - a pagan - saying that he'd convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the Torah within the time he could stand on one foot. Hillel's reply? "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary (also translated "explanation"). Go and study it."

G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1910: "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because *generally* they are the same people. " Loving one's neighbor can be just plain hard because some people are just plain harder to love.

There's a lady in Darlington, South Carolina, named [Annie Mae Belin](https://www.wellandgood.com/benefits-of-minding-your-own-business/) who celebrated her 102nd birthday this month. She says "[trying] to tend to my business. And leave other people's business alone," is the secret to living a long life. Ms. Belin credits her faith for playing a role in her longevity. "He's my all. My everything thing - I just want to keep on loving God. *And treating people like I want to be treated.* Because we need more love in the world for one thing." <https://www.wellandgood.com/benefits-of-minding-your-own-business/> Can we all give an Amen to that? We need more love in the world.

"Love" in these scriptures is not a feeling but an action – it refers to doing justice, to treating people with dignity and justice. And those people we are to love – they are people different from ourselves, they are the stranger, and they are our neighbors. The person of a different skin color, or religion, or nationality, or native language, or age, or disability. They are strangers to us, yes, but they can become our friends and in so doing, reveal to us a deeper understanding of our Creator and our Creator's love for us.

I remember having a button in my teens that said something like – and please pardon me, English teachers - "The Lord Don't Make No Junk". I believe that to be true down to the core of my being. If we love and respect our Creator, we must love and respect Creation. Our Creator made a great and complex kaleidoscope of Humanity, all in our Creator's Image. If we acknowledge that, then we must recognize the Divine spark in every other person.

I feel sorry for people who believe their race is superior, their gender is superior, or their country, or their denomination... they spit in the eye of our Creator and immeasurably impoverish themselves in the process.

## Tolerance Is Not Love

Tolerance – remember those bumper stickers that read “Teach Tolerance”? Well, that is a good baby step, I suppose, towards building a more just and inclusive community but I submit to you that the scriptural mandate does not end with and has not been fulfilled when we have *tolerated* one another.

I have personally been tolerated as being gay [I use the word “Gay” interchangeably with LGBT], *tolerated* as being gay by my birth family - and I have been *accepted* as gay, as I am here. I can tell you they are not the same. No, because tolerance by its very nature assumes superiority and that the ones who are *being* tolerated are somehow “*less than*” the ones doing the tolerating. I do not believe the teachings of our Lord are fulfilled when we make folks feel “less than”. Tolerance is not love. We are not told to “tolerate our neighbors”.

Have *you* ever felt bullied? Have *you* ever been made to feel “less than”? Maybe your cousins were better off and had better toys, a larger home, or big vacations, and you just felt like the poor cousin? Ever been the last kid chosen for a team on the playground? Ever been teased for being too skinny, too fat, too short, too tall, not having the right or the nicest clothes? Not coming from the right neighborhood? Or not going to the right church?

Think back for a moment – have *you* ever been made to feel like you were “less than”? Have *you* ever felt bullied?

We ask our children: “how would that make you feel? How would you like it if...?” If we truly want to love our neighbors as ourselves, let us ask that of ourselves. “How would that make you feel? How would you like it if...?”

In asking that, and in intentionally becoming allies with those who are strangers to you today, you may find you have made more friends, have enriched your life immeasurably.

Rather than tolerating one another, we must find ways to accept each other as Christ accepted us.

Imagine with me – What if all the gay church musicians across the country were carried off on a Saturday night by Martians? If that ever happened, most churches in America would be humming on Sunday morning.

While those gay musicians may be loved by their individual congregations, what messages do their denominations send?

The United Methodist Church has for many years been dealing with acceptance of gays, marriages, and ordination of gay clergy. I grew up in the United Methodist Church – it was my home, and that of my mom, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, and on. But *The Book of Discipline* – the governing rules of the denomination – says “[t]he practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.”

When I felt the call to study for the ministry, I was told by a well-meaning leader in the church that since I was in New York, I could *probably* be ordained if I went into hospital chaplaincy and was “quiet”. Now, how would you like that? There’s Tolerance for you. In the next several years, the denomination will quite literally be split apart over this issue.

And, the Southern Baptists had their big meeting lately, you may have seen in the news. I’m not going to try and comment other than observe that the ordination of 3 women, alone, sent them into panic. Ordination of women is an issue that most American Protestants dealt with 50 years ago.

Thankfully, this congregation is part of the Alliance of Baptists, the Baptist Peace Fellowship, and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. By our chosen affiliations, we can send the message of radical acceptance and love of our neighbors out into the world. But we can do even more.

The youth in our community – some are struggling with issues of gender identity, on top of all the other issues that all kids have to struggle with in just growing up and in having more responsibilities and in the changes to their bodies as hormones race and rage... some are struggling with questions about their own gender identities, whether they are gay, whether their families will even accept them, maybe they are being bullied – and it is all so much worse now than when Baby Boomers like me were coming along, way back in the pre-Internet, pre-Social Media Dark Ages. And for some of these kids, the pressures are just too great. Being tolerated is not enough.

According to [The Trevor Project](#), the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ and questioning young people under 25:

- Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death among young people ages 10-24
- LGB youth contemplate suicide at almost 3 times the rate of their heterosexual peers
- LGB youth are almost 5 times as likely to have attempted suicide as heterosexual youth
- LGB youth from highly rejecting families are 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide as LGB peers who reported no or low levels of family rejection
- Each episode of LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average

What can we do to help these kids? But tolerance is simply not enough. Our kids – even kids here in Iredell County - are dying. And we must do something to show them we care, that there are allies, and to cultivate a culture that's accepting and compassionate. That is love.

And representation and visibility are so important! As Carl Nass-ib, the first active National Football League player to come out publicly as gay, said in his recent statement, “Representation Matters. *I'm going to do my best and do my part to cultivate a culture that's accepting, that's compassionate.*”

To paraphrase, we can say that he is going to do his best and do his part to love his neighbor as himself.

In order to become an effective ally for people who are different from you, a good way to start is to practice a few simple behaviors:

- Be open-minded – and communicate by your choice of words, tone of voice, and body language, that you are open
- Listen deeply, listen to understand, not just formulate your response
- Communicate an inclusive, approachable, and friendly attitude
- In your home and in your workplace, create a safe place where every person can bring their complete selves without fear
- Look for opportunities to attend cultural or civic events, especially if they are likely to have people who are different in some way from you
- Step out of your personal Comfort Zone – adventure yourself to learn
- Seek Diversity and pursue it
- Recognize that you see things through the lens of your own experiences, your own particular diversity, and that others may have different experiences or perspectives based on their diversity dimensions that are different from yours
- Dr. Kevin Nadal, Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has said: “Microaggressions are defined as the everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups. The difference between microaggressions and overt discrimination or macroaggressions, is that people who commit microaggressions might not even be aware of them.” <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away>
- Try to become more aware of what you say and do in order to reduce microaggressions. Here are some examples: You’re too pretty to be gay. Guess

you've just not yet found a man who's good enough. Or, saying to an Asian person: Oh, you speak English so well – where are you from?, while presuming they must not be from America because they are Asian. Or crossing the street to avoid a Black man. Microaggressions.

- Be mindful of your own assumptions, and – yes – prejudices. Recognize that every living soul has conscious and unconscious biases, and open yourself up to a new and deeper understanding of others
- Stand up against bullying
- Speak up when you hear someone say something that is wrong – you know it when you hear it. If you see something you know is wrong, say something – when it feels physically safe to speak out, call out discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes. Ask “what do you mean by that?” - say “That’s not nice” - challenge it as best you can in the situation. Whatever you do, do not fail in some way to call it out, for if you do not call it out, you become complicit by your silence.
- Educate yourself, read, watch films, have conversations with people who are in some way different from you and respectfully seek to understand the differences
- Support civil rights organizations and social justice organizations. They are fighting discrimination and need the support of Allies, of people who are unlike their members – For example, join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ([NAACP](#)), [National Urban League](#), [National Federation of the Blind](#), [Unidos US](#), [National Organization for Women](#), [National Council of Negro Women](#), [SisterLove, Inc.](#), Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation ([GLAAD](#)), [The Anti-Defamation League](#), and on and on and on. And there will be a chapter of Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays

([PFLAG](#)) started here in Statesville – please reach out to me if you are interested.

- Live every day in the understanding and belief that everyone has the God-given right to be treated with dignity and respect
- Be an encourager – build people up, because this world already does enough to tear them down

[will insert a concluding paragraph]

**Hear now the BENEDICTION:** a Latin word meaning literally, the Good Words, speaking good words over you – So in the words of the hymn writer, John Wimber -

Oh Let the Son of God enfold you, with His spirit and His love. Let Him fill your heart and satisfy your soul. Oh let Him have the things that hold you and His Spirit, like a dove, will descend upon your life and make it whole. Amen!