

“Love Your Neighbor”
Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28
A Sermon by Julia Bower Richardson
Woodbury UMC
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I am so happy to be here and so honored that Pastor Michael asked me to deliver the sermon today on Laity Sunday. I am Julia, and I have attended this wonderful church since I was a baby. I was asked to speak about a Bible verse that is very meaningful to me and my life, and there was one that stood out the most: When Jesus was asked which is the most important commandment and after emphasizing the need to love your God, Jesus stressed the moral foundation of human relationships, the imperative to love your neighbor. And I’m going to talk to you about that today. What may be considered a simple passage has one of the most profound messages in all of Christianity. Loving your neighbor is providing a voice to those whose shouts are silenced. Loving your neighbor is offering a shoulder to rest upon, or your presence to listen, or your example to follow, but further, loving your neighbor is extending yourself to be free of judgment, of bias, of hate. To love another is to acknowledge their true being, to affirm their experiences, and to accept their truths.

From a young age, we are taught to treat others how we want to be treated. Don’t be mean to others, because you wouldn’t want them to be mean to you. This is one of the first lessons we are drilled on, and only because it is so important. And yet this statement that should be so simple is filled with such controversy and constantly disregarded.

One of my strongest pre-adolescent memories shaped my perspective on humanity today. I was in my sixth-grade classroom on a chilly Friday afternoon in December of 2012. I was excited to go home for the weekend, anxiously counting down the days to Christmas. We weren’t told what was wrong: we didn’t have cell phones, and thus no way of learning what was wrong, why we weren’t being dismissed from school at the correct time. All we had were our teacher’s concerned expression, and a weak assurance that everything was fine and we would be released from school to go home soon. I was sitting

next to my best friend Caitlin, and we came up with a handshake to pass the time. I was so young, and so naive. A bit of my unwavering innocence was lost that day. That day, when I finally went home to my parents, my mom squeezed me tighter and held me closer than ever before. It wasn't until later that I learned of the 26 Sandy Hook neighbors we lost that day. When they finally told us what had happened, I couldn't quite wrap my head around the extent of this tragedy. For what was the first time in my life, I was a bystander to the extent of the tragedy that plagues our earth. And it broke my heart. My once bright view of the world was shattered. I cried and cried for those poor children, and when we came to the church for comfort, my sister Grace and I had the honor of lighting twenty-six candles in mourning for our lost neighbors.

So often, peace and harmony seem like foreign concepts in a world plagued by war, hate, and rigidity. And this can be so overwhelming to grasp. So we have to break it down. Love is complicated. When I say the word love, we each conjure a subjective definition in our heads, formed through years of experience and pursuit of this "love." As diverse as we all are in physical and characteristic attributes, we are diverse in our versions of love.

So what did Jesus mean when he urged us to love our neighbor? Was he asking us to knock on doors and offer free hugs, or to provide an active listening outlet for a friend, or to buy flowers on Valentine's Day for our significant other? In a way, yes he was. Simply, he wanted us to treat our loved ones the way they deserve to be treated. To show gratitude for the people who make our life livable. And not as simply, Jesus urged us in this passage to put in the hard work to love your neighbor. Truly loving our neighbor consists of more than just being respectful, or caring, or tolerant. Jesus taught that our neighbors may be quite similar to us, and that they are also often quite different from us. And both groups of neighbors are equally worthy of love. Our neighbors are made up of unique social identities, some rejected in the eyes of society and some revered, and in order to love them all, we must make space in our minds and our hearts to connect with them both mentally and physically.

Jesus's love in action was the model for a modern definition of love by the author Scott Peck, who in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, defined love as "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth."

Our world today houses oppressed populations due to systems of prejudice. Our neighbors are losing their lives due to the pigment of their skin, our neighbors are being discriminated against based on who they love and how they identify, and our neighbors are being separated from their families and denied refuge and safety. Marginalized and maltreated, our neighbors are calling out in pain, anger, and frustration, yet too many of us cannot see past our own experiences and open our minds wide enough to realize what is really happening in our nation and in our world. Christ taught us to answer the highest calling of our heart to support and love our neighbors of every race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Our neighbors are telling us how to love them, and it is our job to listen and to respond. Christ died for each and every one of us. If Jesus valued us enough to go through what He went through, we owe it to Him to value what He values. We need to love what He loves – and He loves us. All of us.

To love one another, we must love ourselves too. For some, myself included, it is far more difficult to give myself the love I deserve than supply this love to others. I will jump at any opportunity to compliment my friends, or spend quality time with my family, or make a small positive gesture to make a stranger's day, but when it comes to acknowledging a personal strength, I often struggle to generate even one positive attribute to describe myself. But even on days like these, I have so much: my family, my friends, my neighbors: the love of God and the love of His people here on Earth. And everyone deserves love. A world without love is no world to live in. In the unprecedented past year and a half as we have dealt with a raging pandemic, love is one of the only consistencies we were promised.

This semester I am enrolled in a positive psychology class. Humanistic psychology, the precursor to positive psychology, stressed that humans are inherently good. Positive psychology, which acknowledges both the good and the bad in all of us, includes the broaden and build theory. This theory posits that our experiences of positive emotions

broaden our momentary thought-action repertoires, which in turn serve to build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. To put this simply, every time we go through a positive experience, we develop skills and awareness of how to use these positive emotions to broaden our minds and thus enjoy more of these positive experiences.

For example, in my own life, I recently flew to South Carolina to visit my best friend, and on the plane ride back I sat next to a woman who seemed about my age, wearing a Cornell sweatshirt, which is the college I attend. So, I went slightly out of my comfort zone and asked her whether she was a student, and we struck up a conversation. This became a very positive experience, and my thoughts were broadened because of my actions: I will now be more confident when approaching a stranger, because I had a pleasant interaction that turned into a supportive friendship. However, if I had received a nasty response and underwent an unpleasant experience, my mind would likely be narrowed, as I would be reluctant to approach a stranger in the future. Positive experiences, and the positive emotions that follow, create and solidify bonds, develop resilience, and encourage new and creative actions and thoughts. So what does this all mean in terms of loving your neighbor? It's simple, really: Positive emotions: enjoyment, happiness, contentment, satisfaction, friendship, and **love**, all enhance resilience, wellbeing, and the ability to cope, while negative emotions, in contrast, decrease them. But negative emotions are inevitable: we grieve, we fear, we disappoint, and we even hate: but it is what comes after that is so critical. It is what we choose to do with these negative emotions that determine our fate. You can be angry, you can be sad, you can be scared, but where do you go from there? Do you give up, do you stay silent, do you concede? Or do you stand up, do you unite, do you listen?

As a senior in high school, I interviewed parents who lost their children in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, for a research study that explored the positive coping mechanisms that victims used to move past tragedy and create a positive outlook by formulating a mission for change. It was heartbreaking, emotional, and empowering. These people had been through insurmountable loss, and they chose to honor their beautiful children's memories by fighting for change. A mother who lost her six-year-old

son that day created the foundation called the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement in honor of him, which teaches children how to manage emotions, how to focus on wellbeing, and how to love. Ms. Lewis told me that channeling her grief into this solution and working to make the world a better place was the most healing thing she could have done. She chose love. Ms. Lewis also told me that Jesse had written a message on the kitchen chalkboard the morning he was killed. It said three words: nurturing, healing, love, but spelled phonetically. Ms. Lewis believed that he wrote this message to let the people he loved know he was okay. That day, Jesse told several of his classmates to run and he saved nine lives with that example of courage. His message of nurturing and healing love is his legacy to this world. Until his last moment, Jesse chose love. He had that inherent goodness that humans have been theorized to have. Though theories are not proven fact, Jesse's example shows the power of love. Jesse was a walking example of loving by extending yourself for others.

With the choice of love and forgiveness comes resilience and understanding. A heart that loves thy neighbor cannot sit idly by while someone suffers a need. In another class this semester, I learned about the cycle of oppression. This concept addresses the socialization timeline of a human's life that shapes our outlooks, starting from birth and continuing until the end. This particular cycle focuses on what it takes to develop judgment and how new perspectives and learning become preconceived notions and biases. We are born into a world where mechanics are already established: with limited information and no choice, we do not feel guilt nor should we be blamed for the stereotypes created and the history lived before our time. We are first socialized and shaped mostly through our parents, relatives, and other loved ones, as we discover for the first time societal expectations, norms, and values. From the very beginning, I would be presented with princesses and pink dresses, stereotypical "girl" items. These messages are then reinforced in our minds consciously and unconsciously through institutions like schools, television, and churches, and through cultural practices like language and music. The instilling of ideas, beliefs, and behaviors reinforces a cycle of oppression.

Gender roles are established and dissonance is deemed inappropriate. Behaving differently is not as simple as most of us think. We are rewarded for good behavior –

conforming to the norms and standards. By the same token, we are punished for bad behavior – questioning or rebelling against oppressive societal norms. This self-perpetuated cycle of oppression often produces devastating results. As we separate the good from the bad, we are presented with dilemmas. Do we stand up for our neighbors and raise consciousness in the face of ignorance, despite the threat of possible opposition? Or do we stay silent and promote the status quo, but thus not create a stir? What does it mean to extend yourself in love when the going gets tough? Apathy - doing nothing - is the easier choice, especially for those who benefit from the perpetuation of the cycle. But we are all victims of this cycle of oppression and we are all hurt by it. Oppression hurts the oppressed and the oppressor. At the core of this cycle of oppression are fear, misunderstanding, insecurity, confusion, and ignorance. The wheel perpetually spins around, and biases turn into habits, as long as fear holds the power. It is the cycle of liberation that gives us hope for critical intra- and interpersonal, as well as systemic changes. Despite what some may argue, prejudice can be untaught, with the acknowledgment of both societal privilege and societal oppression, and the questioning of assumptions to gain exposure to injustices. Reaching out by seeking experiences and proper education builds community and transforms anger and fear into goal-driven action. The cycle of liberation ends with the integration and maintenance of honest policies and necessary integrity in leadership. At the core of this cycle of liberation are balance, security, understanding, and, of course, love. It is our job to choose which cycle we base our values and perceptions on: the cycle of oppression or the cycle of liberation. Are we prepared for uncomfortable conversations? Are we prepared for challenging introspection? Are we prepared for difficult decisions? A true commitment to change must focus both externally and internally. We must recognize and confront our own biases, conscious and unconscious. We must recognize and condemn injustice when we see it in our community.

You can live through God's presence here on Earth by honoring and supporting your neighbors in the form of social justice advocacy. Since May of 2020, a group of dozens of ralliers has gathered on Playhouse Corner in Southbury every Sunday, to advocate for a nation and a world that actually delivers on the promise of liberty and justice for all. And in the face of persistent criticism that we have accomplished nothing,

we have exemplified that black lives matter is not just a concept that we rally for, but an expression of empathy for and solidarity with our neighbors who are treated differently solely because of the color of their skin. Love is a conscious choice. We are faced with challenges and obstacles big and small every day, and we choose how to confront them. When Justice Southbury rallies on Playhouse Corner every Sunday, we choose love. When one starts with love, they always end in the right place. This is why every Sunday at our rallies we hold up signs that say “Love your neighbor.” Because when we say “love your neighbor,” we mean “love your neighbor,” regardless of race, sexual orientation, religion, gender, disability, and nationality. We love our neighbors, we welcome our neighbors for who they are, and we extend ourselves in love for the purpose of nurturing their spiritual growth. Because hate has no home with Christ, and hate has no home on His earth. Truly loving your neighbor is the only method to love God here on Earth. Live by example - If you are loving your neighbor, you’re doing it right. To judge a person on a single perception or stereotype is to minimize them to a single story. And no one’s identity can be properly described through one simplified predisposition. We are all unique human beings with multiple aspects that make us “us,” so stripping us down to only one attribute of ourselves takes away our true essence, our true identity. Looking at one small corner of a painting will not tell you what the whole painting consists of, and it is nearly impossible to predict the full beauty of the painting with only having a small fraction of the whole. God made us all unique not to divide, but to appreciate. He has brought us the gift of variety, of a population consisting of no two people alike. This world is so beautiful and diverse, and hate only dulls the brightness. When we learn to love, to cherish, to welcome, to extend ourselves for others, we add to the beauty God has given to us. If love truly is a choice, then why consider any other alternative? Choose love, always. Amen.