

**Text:** [Isaiah 11:6-9](#)  
**Date:** January 26, 2020  
**Title:** Love and Fear 3: “Loving the Other (Even in Church)”  
**Theme:** The church is the place where we practice the hard work of loving people who are different from us.

## Intro

We’ve been talking about how to love like Jesus

I don’t know if you’ve observed this, but sometimes the hardest people to love are those who are closest to us

We’re certainly experiencing this now in the United Methodist Church as we talk about potentially splitting and dividing the denomination

Today, I want to make the case that Jesus designed the church from the start as a place where we practice doing the hard work of loving people who are different from us

## Question

How would you describe the purpose of the church?

### 1

Jesus has given us an incredibly difficult assignment: love everyone  
I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t come naturally to me

I mean, I like people – I genuinely do – I can find redeeming qualities in just about everybody –

because I reason that God has given everyone something that makes them special

And so far, I’ve never been disappointed

But love people? I mean, genuinely love them?

That’s kind of pushing it

Every once in a while, I’ll have a magical day when I feel at one with the world

Have you ever had that kind of day?

When even I, introverted as I tend to be, actually want to talk to random people in checkout lines

Where I am reminded that every soul I meet is beautiful

A special creation of God that will never again be repeated

Of course, other days I really can't stand anybody and just want to be left alone

You know what I'm talking about?

## 2

What I think the church, at its best, can help us do is practice the hard work of learning to love people who are not like us

You might say that there are other places we practice loving people, even difficult people

Like in our families

But that's a different kind of assignment – they're still like us

Because no matter how difficult someone is – what do we say?

“They're still your family”

There's an expectation built into that relationship that you will at least make an attempt – because they're family

Church though is something different

It has been from the beginning

Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross

You know who the first Gentile convert to Christianity was?

Cornelius, a captain in the Roman army (Acts 10) isn't that the greatest irony ever?

This should give you a clue that Jesus' goal in building a Church was to teach love through unity and not uniformity

To teach love *through* difference and *in spite of* difference

Even among the twelve disciples, you had people who were predisposed NOT to get along

Those whose political positions and commitments were fundamentally irreconcilable

Jesus called a tax collector named Levi – who was a collaborator with the Roman occupiers of Palestine  
He also called Simon the Zealot, a member of the radical resistance who wanted to overthrow the Romans

There's no reason they should have wanted to hang out together  
Except...well, Jesus

### 3

The distinctive thing about Christian prayer – well, at least it SHOULD be the distinctive thing  
Is that it should make us UNCOMFORTABLE

What do I mean by that?  
Well, didn't Jesus tell us to pray for our enemies?

This morning – it might make some of you uncomfortable if I asked you to pray for President Trump  
It might make others of you uncomfortable if I asked you to pray for Speaker Pelosi

Perhaps we don't make each other uncomfortable enough, often enough  
Maybe we've been guilty of softening this requirement of faith  
Well, we reason, it doesn't apply to my (and you can fill in the blank here) Political opponents, in-laws, jerky drivers on the Turnpike, whatever

But sadly, Jesus never carved out those kinds of exceptions  
Though surely drivers on the Schuylkill might have qualified?

### 4

I was on the phone with a friend the other day  
He's involved in local politics in the town where he lives  
And I know the area, so I know people can be, well...challenging

Let's be honest, people can be challenging everywhere  
But I was amazed at his unwillingness to say anything negative, even about the hardest people he has to deal with  
I hung up thinking, "he's a better Christian than I'll probably ever be"

## 5

To the extent that I've learned them at all – and maybe I haven't learned them all that well

I've been grateful through the years for the lessons I've learned by attempting to love difficult people in the church

And for people's attempts to love me – because honestly, I'm not always a peach either

The real me is opinionated, blunt, and with about zero filter

I have to dial myself back any number of notches before I step in the pulpit

What I've learned in doing this work is that all of us are kind of a mess

But still, our relationships with each other can be beautiful

Even when we disagree

It is possible to be completely at your wits end with someone, see a glimpse of that love and care in their spirit that reminds you of what makes them special, and be moved to hug it out regardless

I'm sure Jesus knew that

And he built this thing we call the church – starting with his disciples – as a place where we would learn how to love those who are different from us

## 6

This is at odds with most people's view

That the church is meant to be a nice place where everybody just smiles and gets along

What if instead it's meant to be a challenging place where everybody is real with each other until we come to an understanding – until we can work things out?

Maybe we've been guilty of allowing church to be way too easy

Because we haven't allowed the relationships to be real enough

You can navigate a lot of things with a lot of people if you just never talk about your differences, right?

But I'm having a hard time imagining that in all the time the disciples spent together, the tax collector and the Zealot never went at it

That they never had it out with each other as they walked along the road

## 7

As we come to this point that we've been anticipating the last few months  
A vote on whether to become a Reconciling Congregation

I want everyone to remember something  
We'll be the same people *before* and *after* the meeting  
I will be and so will you

You may think, "this could change how I feel about the church"  
Could be  
But if you disagree with the outcome, remember that the people who sit in  
the pew with you today will still be the same people who are sitting in  
the pew with you next Sunday

So what will have changed?  
A vote isn't going to change my commitment to you  
And I hope it won't change our commitment to each other

I hope, in fact, that it will strengthen it  
By broadening our evangelical commitment to love and show hospitality  
and grace to ALL those in our community who are seeking Jesus

I want this to be a place where all feel welcome  
Regardless of orientation or identity  
Race or ethnicity  
Politics or profession

## 8

I know that's hard to imagine  
But that's the whole point  
Jesus calls us to create the community that other people can't imagine

Which brings me to the scripture from Isaiah 11  
Chapter 11 starts like this:  
A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots. (Isa. 11:1, CEB)

When we read this, right away we recognize it as a messianic passage  
It's a description of the day when God's chosen will appear  
And bring a new order into the world

The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them. (Isa. 11:6, CEB)

The world that Jesus wants to create is one that we have a hard time  
imagining

One where the unlikeliest of creatures dwell together in peace  
Where even the carnivores go vegetarian  
And we all learn "not to harm or destroy on God's holy mountain"

The fact that we *can't* imagine it,  
That it seems totally unrealistic, is *exactly* the point  
That's why Jesus called the Zealot and the tax collector  
That's why the Spirit sent Peter to preach the gospel to Cornelius the  
Roman centurion

And that's why we in the church need each other  
Whether we agree on everything or not

Our ability to be the Church together  
Has never been contingent on our agreement  
On the uniformity of our background, circumstances or opinions

Instead, we are bound together by something deeper  
By a calling to love one another  
In the name of, and through the power of, Jesus Christ

Amen.

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