

Text: [Romans 5:6-11](#)
Date: January 12, 2020
Title: Love and Fear 1: “Loved by the Other”
Theme: In Jesus, we have been saved by a God who is completely different from us, who challenges us to love without fear.

Intro

Over the next few weeks, we’re going to be talking about Love & Fear

Why this topic?

We’re beginning an election year in a nation that’s about as divided as one can imagine

Fear of immigrants, tensions over race and class – all feel like they are at critical points –

Not to mention that this week we nearly went to war again in the Middle East

Even in the United Methodist Church, we’re having conversations about splitting up with each other

Given these realities, I think it’s good for us to have a refresher about what love looks like, amen?

Loving those who are different from us

Loving & forgiving our enemies

Showing hospitality to everyone – even people we don’t particularly like – is the most difficult thing to learn to do

But it’s exactly what Jesus calls us to do

Question

Can you remember a time when someone you were at odds with did something kind for you? Or vice-versa?

1

In Romans, Paul describes love in these terms:

who would you be willing to die for?

That’s harsh, but it puts one of the central claims of the Christian faith front and center

God was willing to die for us – isn’t that what we say?

But Paul pushes this even farther
“You might be willing to die for a good person, for a righteous person,” he
says

But Christ died for us knowing that we were neither good nor righteous
Far from it

In fact, Paul says, this was the ultimate act of enemy-love

To give yourself up for friends or family – that wouldn’t be surprising
In fact, I think many of us would feel that was our duty, our responsibility

But now: imagine the person you like least in this world – personal
acquaintance or public figure, I’m not going to judge

Go ahead, picture their face right now

Would you be willing to offer yourself for them?

Do I have your attention?

2

I know that this comes as a bit of a surprise after preaching for weeks that
Jesus’ birth is about God becoming like us

About the fact that God wants to be **like** us, wants to be **near** us, **with** us
Wants to walk among us as an act of love **for** us

But we can’t forget: God is simultaneously completely **UNLIKE** us
God does the things that we **CAN’T** do
The things we would never be willing to do
God’s love is incomprehensible to us

3

And in fact, when we try to live it out in imitation of Jesus
People misunderstand it, ridicule it, doubt it and resist it

During WWII, Pierre-Marie Théas (Tay-az’), a Catholic Bishop in France,
was a part of the Church’s resistance to the Nazi occupation

In 1942, he penned a pastoral letter condemning the Vichy regime’s
deportation of Jews and ordered his parish priests to read it during
Mass

He had other communications smuggled out of France to England, where they were read over the radio

He even turned a room in the episcopal palace into a document-forging factory, and instructed his officials to help hide Jewish families

In 1944, after refusing to meet with the Vichy Head of State, Philippe Pétain (peh'-ta) and a particularly fiery sermon, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp

In the camp, some of the Christian prisoners – trade unionists, communists, resistance leaders – asked him to lead a day-long retreat

He surprised them all by deciding to preach about forgiveness

As part of his sermon, he gave them the charge to pray for their captors

This didn't go over well

The prisoners got angry with him

The bishop is supposed to have said: "I cannot proclaim anything but what the Lord said: Love your enemies. No more, no less."

In the lead-up to the Iraq war in 2003, one of our United Methodist pastors – from right here in NJ – traveled to Iraq

To meet the people, to pray, to be present with them – actually placing himself in the way of potential violence as a means to show his solidarity with them

It was immensely controversial at the time and got him into all kinds of trouble with his congregation

Looking back now, who was right?

4

No one is a stranger or an enemy to God

Sometimes we talk about people who live as enemies of God

Paul even talks that way in this passage - about himself and us!

But in truth, God has no enemies

WE often use that kind of language –

the language of enemies and outsiders

To dehumanize people, to create distrust and to deny people their rights

To set up an 'us' versus 'them'

But God has no enemies
God is pure love
So pure that we cannot even imagine it
Completely fearless, completely selfless
Isn't that exactly how Jesus loved?

5

This is what Christian love looks like – welcoming the stranger
And not just welcoming, but being genuinely concerned for their welfare
Concerned enough to invest one's own self in it – all the way, without
reserve or fear

This is what makes the violence that's happened in churches so upsetting
We need to be about welcoming the stranger – it's why we exist!
I don't want anyone to frighten me out of my responsibility
The responsibility that Jesus gives me – to do that
I need to be more afraid of disappointing him than I am of any mortal
consequence

Bishop Will Willimon, in his book *Fear of the Other*, talks about meeting a
homeless man on the street who asked him for \$20 for food
He looked the guy up and down, thought it through and said to himself –
“yeah right, that's not for food”
But he gave it to him anyway
The guy didn't say thank-you, which offended him
The man took a few steps away, then turned and said, “I guess you expect
me to say thank-you”
“Well, yeah, that would be nice,” the bishop said
“Well, I won't. Jesus made you help me.
You'd never have done it on your own.”

6

It's true.
The only way I can genuinely embrace this calling is by remembering that
God reached out for me when I was an outsider
When I was living apart from and separated from God
Jesus reached out to me

We don't understand this
It's comes as something completely unexpected
And so unlike our way of approaching the world

It's hard for us to love the other
We don't naturally seek unity with those who are different
We seek separation and distance – because we're afraid
We turn away to keep ourselves safe and protected
(Often, though, it backfires, doesn't it?
We only end up isolated and scared)

In Jesus, we are saved by a God we don't understand
By a God who is surprising
Who, for as much as Jesus looks like us, is completely other

Who is capable of loving without fear
Purely and selflessly
Without holding back and
without ever stopping to ask whether those on the receiving end of that love
are worthy

This week, the question I want you to consider is this one:
How has our love fallen short of the standard Jesus set –
not only in his life – but through his death?

Amen.

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