This is a preaching draft.

Love Without Exceptions | Luke 10:25-36
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A while back, I was on an email thread from the parents of the students at my kid's school. I'm not sure how I got on the thread, but it was interesting to see what transpired. The thread was concerning a certain class that I didn't think was very controversial. But I was very wrong because the thread just blew up with parents voicing their strong opinions. Many "for" and many "against" it. And with every email response you could see the deep concerns but also the deep division happening among the parents.

You could "feel" this pull towards two different camps. And you could sense the tension and at times the passive aggressiveness starting to come out. And eventually, it got pretty ugly. Now, mind you, MOST of these parents were Christians and it was a "Christian" school.

As I thought about this incident, it made me think about what's been happening in the broader society. And ALL of us are aware of this. That in the past decade or so, there has been and continues be an increase in ***polarization*** and ***tribalism*** in this world. Whether the division is over who we ARE or are NOT voting for; the conflicts in the middle east, immigration, issues of justice… you name it, there is major division. And you can "feel" this visceral pull in this world towards different tribes. And it's most evident in the media and "social" media.

But unfortunately, this isn't just happening in the larger society, it's been happening more and more in the church. Just think about the COVID times… you all remember that… Seems like a century ago. But remember all the divisions that were happening not just in society about how to respond to this crisis, but even within the church.

I remember at the church in Houston where I served, how long-time friends in the congregation became almost enemies because of their view of how the church should respond to this crisis. It got ugly and people left the church, on BOTH sides of the aisle. And the church felt so divided. But it wasn't just COVID. There were countless of other issues that caused people to be entrenched in their own tribes.

Now, just as an aside, I believe there are times when we DO need to draw a line in the sand, especially in regard to theological integrity. However, there are times when Christians are at war with each other about secondary, even tertiary matters. Even matters that are quite "insignificant" in light of eternity.

Now, this problem of division and tribalism isn't anything new, even in the church. **BUT** the problem recently, is that even IN the church, these disagreements have turned into the VILLIFICATION of the other side. That it's no longer about differing viewpoints, but the "other side" is now "morally wrong." And the result is that "at best" we love those who are on the other side at an arm's length. But "at worst" fellow believers end up having animosity towards one another.

But as we know, this is NOT the way of Jesus; This is NOT the way we are to view and treat those who are different from us; those who differ from us; or even those who are

difficult to love. This is NOT the way fulfill the Great Commandment to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

But the question is: *In the midst of this time of increased tribalism and division, EVEN in the church, how do we truly display the type of love that Jesus wants us to have? How do we TRULY begin to love our neighbors as we love ourselves SO THAT we as God's church can be that salt and light to the rest of the world?* Well, this is the question I want to explore with you this morning.

Because ALL of us have people in our lives that are difficult to love because they differ from us, are demanding, or have hurt us. Now, please don't start pointing the finger at who you believe is the difficult person to love… And if you can't think of anyone that might be difficult to love, chances are YOU are the difficult person (Just kidding there… sort of).

Well, to answer this question, maybe not completely, but at least "begin" to answer this question, I want us to look at a passage that many of us are familiar with. Even those who may not have grown up in the church, or may not even be followers of Jesus, have heard about or at least have heard references to the story that was read known as the "Parable of the Good Samaritan."

Now, normally, when we hear about this Parable, or when people reference it in the news, it's simply an example of a person who helps another in need. And usually, the moral of the story is to stop being selfish and help people around you. And that's a good lesson to learn.

However, when you look beneath the surface, you find that this passage is really about the question I just posed. It seeks to answer the question: *"How do we **truly** love those who are different from us; those who differ from us; or are even difficult to love? How do we **truly** love our neighbors as we ourselves?"*And Jesus answers this question, as He often does, through a story. And it's the well-known story of the Good Samaritan.

But in order to understand **WHAT** Jesus is trying to teach us, we need to understand **WHY** Jesus shared this story in the first place. And the WHY of this story is found in the verses right before it.

Listen to what Jesus says in **vs. 25**: *25 And behold, a lawyer (which is better translated "expert in religious law." So a professional clergy of that time.) stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" 27 And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." 29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

So, here, a religious leader confronts Jesus to "test" him. *Why?* Well, it wasn't just to try and debunk and disprove Jesus, or to see if Jesus really "knew" his "stuff". Instead, when we look at these verses, we realize that the REAL reason why he was confronting Jesus was to "justify" a certain attitude and outlook he had on life. *And what was that attitude and outlook?*

Well, again, as he says in **vs. 25**, "*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"*

In response, Jesus says in **vs. 26**: *"What is written in the Law? How do **you** read it?" [27] And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*

In other words, the essence of what it means to follow God, to be a true "believer" is to ***love God and love others as we love ourselves.*** And here the religious leader summarizes what the whole Old Testament revealed about the essence of following God. And this summary is often known as the "Great Commandment" and it's found in verses like **Deut. 6:5** and **Lev. 19:18.** And of course, Jesus Himself refers to this in **Matthew 22 vs. 36-40**. And this was well known to all of the Jewish religious leaders back then. This is why Jesus responds in **vs. 28**: *"You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."*

Now, a word of caution here: before we think that Jesus is somehow advocating that we "earn" salvation by loving God and loving others, we need to understand the context of his statement. That is, the reason why Jesus says, "do this, and you will live" was to ***confront and reveal*** the real issue in this religious leader's heart.

Putting it another way, what Jesus here is saying here is: "Yes, you're right. The essence of what it means to follow God IS to love God and love others, but the real question is: *Are you actually doing this?" So* Jesus here turns the table and instead of being "tested," he actually "tests" the heart of this religious leader. Because you see, for this religious leader, he was okay with the whole loving "God" part. He was probably very fervent, faithful, and probably did a lot of great religious stuff. BUT, the real problem was the second part of this Great Commandment. Because for this religious leader, the problem was that deep inside he really didn't want to "love" his neighbors, at least in the way that God wanted. That's why it says in **vs. 29**: "[29] *But he, desiring to **justify** himself, said to Jesus, "And **who** is my neighbor?"* That is, "I know that I'm supposed to love my neighbors, but do I have to love EVERYBODY? Can't I choose who my "neighbors" really are?"

Putting it another way, the problem of this guy's heart was that he wanted to define, or rather, re-define God's commandment for his own comfort and convenience. You see, he wanted to only love those HE wanted to love; those who were easier to love; maybe those who believed the same things HE did; those he was comfortable loving; those in his own tribe. In other words, ***He wanted his love to have exceptions.*** And herein lies the heart of the problem and the WHY of the Parable.

Now, on a side note, the problem of "loving with exceptions" or "exclusions" wasn't just THIS religious leader's problem. It was actually a common understanding of many of the Jews regarding the Great Commandment back in that time. *In fact*, in many of the ancient Jewish literature, there was an idea that some people are our "neighbors" while others were not. And that the responsibility of "good" Jews was to **only** love those who were considered "true" neighbors. And for many, the only "true" neighbors were fellow Jews; those in their "own" tribe. *Thus,* non-Jews known as Gentiles or people like the Samaritans, or half-Jews, were not considered "true" neighbors. So, you can already see why having a Samaritan in the story was so important.

Furthermore, these distinctions were made ***narrower*** by some of the really hard-core Jews like the Pharisees and the Essenes because they didn't even include ALL Jews.

As one commentator noted: *"The Essenes taught that one was to love all the children of light who are part of the community but to **hate** the children of darkness who stand outside the community*." As another commentator summarized: "This expert in the law asked the question "who is my neighbor?"– not so much to determine to whom he must show love, but so as to ***calculate*** the identity of those to whom he need NOT show love." (p. 426, NICNT). He was trying to "calculate" those he didn't HAVE to love. Another way to think about it is that in his heart he wanted to separate and put into ***columns*** those he wanted to love and those he didn't. ***He wanted his love to have exceptions.***

Now, for us this morning, before we go any further, as we think about this, even in our own lives, the question is: *Do WE tend to "love" people in this way? Do we at times consciously or unconsciously "calculate" and create invisible COLUMNS in our hearts of those we want to love and those we don't?*

For instance, maybe in the "will love" column, column "A," we have people who love us back, are easy to love, or are comfortable with, or are similar to us, those who think like us or live like us, in our tribe, or are just simply nice people. *But in the other column*, column "B," maybe we have a terrible boss, an annoying neighbor, a mean co-worker, or someone who has hurt us or offended us deeply; maybe even a church member or family member; or just folks who are different from us. And without us maybe realizing it, we have like this religious leader created "columns in our hearts" and ***calculated*** a love that has exceptions. And we, like this religious leader, have re-defined God's command for our own comfort and convenience.

As I thought about this in my own life, I was pretty convicted because I realized that I have "multiple" columns in my heart and a lot of exceptions: In column "A," are those who I "want" to love, those who are easy to love, like my family, good friends, those who agree with me theologically and philosophically, those in my own spiritual "tribe," and generally, those who are nice to me.

But then there's column "B" which might be those I love at a arms distance – cautiously loving them. But then there's Column "C" and "D" which contain folks that are REALLY difficult to love, folks that I have to really pray and work hard at to just tolerate. Just being honest here. And even as a Pastor, I confess I have a tendency to love with exceptions. And I find myself re-defining God's command to love my neighbor for my own comfort and convenience.

Well, this is precisely the problem and issue that Jesus wanted to confront and challenge. Because this is NOT the type of love that God call us to show. And to show us a different way, Jesus in response shares the famous Parable. And the Parable goes like this. **Vs. 30**: *30"(One day) A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.*

Now, it's important to note here that we don't know if this man was Jewish or not. And I think Jesus purposely left this out so that the religious leader could not pinpoint if the man in this story was a "true" neighbor or not.

Anyways, this man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was about 17 miles long and known for its' danger, was assaulted, mugged, and beaten so badly that he looked dead. But then someone passes by and sees him. **Vs. 31**: "*31Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.*"

So, the first person that saw this hurting man was a ***Jewish Priest***. Now, for many of the hearers of this story, including the religious leader, they would have thought: Great! What luck. A Priest! Someone who was super revered. Surely, he will help this hurting man. Surely, HE will be the hero. But instead… the Priest "intentionally" walks to the other side of the road and keeps on his way. Pretty disappointing…

But then another possible hero walks by. And here again is another Jewish religious leader: a ***Levite***. Note how Jesus uses the examples of religious leaders 2 times in this story to get his point across. Now, Levites were like the Associate Pastors of our day. They assisted the priests with various religious duties and watched over the temple. So surely this "Associate Pastor" Levite would help. Plus, he's probably not as busy as the Priest and probably more of a people-person. But nope, he doesn't. **Vs. 32**, "*[32]So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*"

So the Levite does the exact same thing as the Priest. He intentionally walks to the other side of the road and keeps going. *In other words,* they both "chose" who they wanted to help and love. They both had "exceptions" and "exclusions" to their love.

Now, before we immediately condemn the Priest and Levite, it's important to note the possible reasons why they might have ignored this hurting man on the road. And one possible reason, and this is NOT to justify their actions, was that maybe they thought this guy was actually dead; and if you remember, in the Jewish religion back then, if you touched a dead person you would become spiritually "unclean."

So maybe they didn't stop for legitimate "religious" reasons. Or maybe they were just late for an important committee meeting or had some sermon prep to do… But at the least, they could have checked into the guy and asked if he was still alive.

But regardless, the point is that they didn't stop. And Jesus didn't let them off the hook even for legitimate religious reasons. They dropped the ball and chose NOT to help and love that neighbor who was in need.

But then the shocking part of the story comes. And you know it. A third person passes by. But this time, it's a ***Samaritan.*** Now, without going into too much detail because many of you probably heard about how Jews viewed Samaritans, but the important thing to note is that Samaritan's were considered "outsiders" to the Jewish community, spiritually "impure," outside their tribe. So they definitely were on the "NOT TO LOVE" column, column "B," for many Jews, including the religious leader who confronted Jesus. Yet it was this Samaritan that became the hero of this story. **Vs. 33**: *[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he **saw** him, he had **compassion**. [34] He **went** to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. [35]And the next day (notice that he helped this person all night!) he took out two denarii (which was about 2 weeks-worth of lodging) and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'*

So, not only did this Samaritan STOP to help this hurting man, but he went way above and beyond what was expected. Jesus says that the Samaritan WENT to him; BANDAGED him; POURED oil and wine on him; placed him on his donkey; carried him to the inn; took care of him; and then left enough money behind to make sure the man had two weeks lodging to recover. He then tells the innkeeper to keep a running tab so that

when he returns, he can pay for any cost overruns. So, he "followed up" with him to make sure he was okay! In other words, the Samaritan's love was sacrificial, genuine, and compassionate; And unlike the Priest and Levite, he showed love WITHOUT exceptions.

And herein lies the heart of what Jesus wants us to see and the lesson of this story. Jesus here through the Samaritan "defines" for us what it really means to love our neighbors as ourselves. ***He shows us that to love our neighbors means to love without exceptions. There is to be no column "B." And to love people genuinely, compassionately, and sacrificially. And more practically, it means being willing to be "interrupted" and "inconvenienced" to serve another in need.*** THIS is what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. THIS is GOD'S definition. And this the type of love that Jesus wanted the religious leader to have. And this is the type of love that He desires ALL of us to have, especially in a day and age when people are excluding more and more people from their COLUMN A.

This is the radical challenge that Jesus gives to us this morning: To love without exceptions, without columns; to have a love that is genuine, compassionate, and sacrificial; a love that is willing to be interrupted and inconvenienced. This is why in **vs. 36**, Jesus concludes: "*[36] (So) Which of these three, do **you** think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" To which the religious leader replied, "The one who showed him mercy." And then Jesus concludes by saying, "You go, and do likewise."*

So that's the story. *What's the application? Well first,* I think that this story and passage presents a pretty powerful challenge. *As mentioned, I think it challenges us to ask ourselves if we like the religious leader in this passage make exceptions and exclusions to our love? Do WE in our hearts create columns to separate those who we love and those we don't? But more importantly, are WE willing to destroy the columns so that we can love without exceptions, love genuinely, compassionately, and sacrificially, EVEN when it interrupts or inconveniences or costs us something?*

And this is important because this gets at the "heart" of what it really means to follow Jesus. Because it's not just about loving God and doing all the right religious things like praying, reading the Bible, attending church, tithing, and serving, though all that is important. But following Jesus means loving people around us who might be different from us; those who may differ from us in our viewpoints, and those who might be difficult to love; those who are not nice to us; those who might have even hurt us; those may even consider our enemies. Because that's exactly what Jesus did.

Even if it is a problem neighbor, a church member who rubs us the wrong way, a boss that is overly demanding, a co-worker who is completely annoying, a child that is rebellious, a spouse that we have problems with, or people who do not share our way of life, or are in our same tax bracket, or even those who have significantly hurt us, the call of God is to love them the way the Samaritan loved the stranger on the side of the road. Because that's the way Jesus has loved us.. This is GOD's definition of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

But the real question is: How do we "actually" live this out? At least on a consistent basis? Because it is NOT easy to love the way Jesus wants us to love. How do we have this type of love in our hearts towards those who are different, difficult, or demanding? How do we truly love without exceptions? And how do we destroy the columns that are in our hearts

that may have been there for years? Columns that may be 10 feet thick and 10 feet high because of past hurt or pain?

Well, the answer is: ***We can't***. Well, at least not by our own strength or effort. In fact, it's impossible to love the way God wants us to love on our own. And there are no practical 3 easy steps that can help us become more loving. And to be honest, there are folks in our "Not to love" column that we may feel are "impossible" to love. Especially, if we have been abused or hurt deeply by them. And sometimes it will take a VERY long time to heal and we may need therapy and much prayer along the way.

HOWEVER, I do believe that there is a starting point. And that starting point is when we begin to realize OUR place in this Parable. *What do I mean by this?* Well, I believe the columns in our hearts can ONLY begin to be torn down when we understand that WE are the hurting, hopeless, and broken person on the side of the road. That ALL of us, before we met Jesus, were the discarded, overlooked, and abandoned. That ALL of us were like sheep who had gone astray and as a result, had become lost; without hope; in spiritual darkness and despair. And though most of the world had passed us by, Jesus, who in a sense, is the "ultimate" Good Samaritan noticed us.

And instead of passing by, he STOPPED in his tracks, came DOWN to us from Heaven and came to where we were, had compassion on us, healed us, carried us on his back, and sacrificially gave of Himself for us, and ultimately, Jesus gave HIS life on the cross so that OUR life might be restored, reconciled, and healed.

And the more we grasp our desperate and hopeless state apart from God, and then grasp the immensity of God's love and grace towards us despite our brokenness and sin, the more we can begin to show others this type of love. As **1 John 4:19** reminds us, "We love because Christ FIRST loved us."

Now, as a side note, when I thought about this story a little more, I wondered how the person who was beaten up felt after waking up at the inn. And wondering who helped him and put the bandages on him. And asking the Innkeeper, "Who did this?" And the innkeeper telling him that it was a stranger who brought you in on his own donkey, and that he stayed up with you all night to make sure you were okay. And that he paid for 2 weeks' worth of lodging and will return to make sure you are okay.

And I thought about the gratitude that this person must have felt. And my hunch is that after THIS person got better and he ran into another hurting and needy person that he probably would not pass by and go on the other side, no matter who that person was. But instead, I suspect that he would also personally, genuinely, and sacrificially help and love that person because he himself experience that same grace and love.

And so I think it is with us. The more we understand God's undeserved, compassionate, sacrificial love towards us, EVEN while we were HIS enemies; even while we were yet sinners, that Christ died for us; the more we can begin to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And so the application and challenge of this message isn't for us to go out there just "try harder" love people who are difficult to love, but it is to take more time to remember and embrace the amazing love that God has for us. And to be constantly reminded that Christian life has never been and never will be about OUR goodness, OUR effort, OUR love, but it has been and always will be about HIS grace, HIS sacrifice, HIS love for us. And that

all we can do is rest in that love; to receive that grace; the more we can RESPOND to it by loving others the way that God loves us.

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