

Sermon – October 29, 2023

“This Thing Called Love!” Matthew 22:34-46

Prayer: (*Ignatius of Loyola, The Spiritual Exercises*) Take, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me, to you I return it. All is yours, do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me. Amen.

Love is a four-letter word. And so are the words hate and fear! With the rest of the world, we are watching with concern as the developments of the war between Hamas and the Israeli forces continue to shake our comfort zones on a daily basis. Those of you who have been following the several decades of animosity between these two groups may have also acknowledged the injustices that Jews and Palestinians have suffered, particularly civilians – men, women, children and families who just want to live their lives peacefully. Journalist David Fidler mentions in his article that the war was the result of “contested concepts of nationhood, incompatible desires for the same homeland, zero-sum *competition over sovereignty, unequal economic opportunities, religious frictions, and the machinations of outside powers.*” Fidler reflects that “failures to reach a settlement have now led to war between the most anti-Palestinian Israeli government in decades and a Palestinian faction *virulently hostile to Israel.*”

For those of us watching from afar, we are troubled, angered, anxious, scared of what might be the outcome of this war. In times of crisis and social disruption, people still look for guidance and assurance that peace and reconciliation may soon come. And the need to be present for each other in our communities is crucially needed. Where is love and how do we show love in this uncertain, wilderness time? In our gospel reading, we know that the Pharisees love to test Jesus, but perhaps the lawyer, the one who approached Jesus, had a similar feeling of being overwhelmed when he asked him, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” — for there were 613 laws in the Torah. How was a person to keep track of them all, let alone prioritize them?

The lawyer may be trying to do one of these three things when he questioned Jesus: first, he was trying to outwit Jesus; second, he may be siding with the Pharisees by confirming to the crowds that the Pharisees were far smarter than the Sadducees; and third, he may be genuinely seeking to discern what the law requires of him. What he has heard may have inspired him to believe that Jesus is able to answer the questions of his heart. Jesus answers with two commandments quoted from the Torah: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” (Deuteronomy 6: 5) and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19: 18). For Jesus, loving God –loving neighbours – these two tenets of love cannot be separated. You cannot love God if you hate your neighbour. Similarly, you cannot love your neighbour if you do not love God who is the source of love. Love is a profound, radical word. We say it almost all the time. We try to express it in many ways. And yet, for some reasons, love is also the most violated, abused and misunderstood of all words. American theologian Frederick Buechner once said this: *“Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold, that is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent.”*

Much of Jesus’ earthly life and many of his undertakings were tied to giving and receiving love through hospitality. He was a guest in many homes and at numerous meals. Although without a place of his own, he acted as a host to individuals, small groups, and huge crowds, making use of places that were available to him. Jesus encourages a “hospitable Christianity” whose love for neighbours provides room for people of different backgrounds, traditions and faiths to live together in harmony for the well-being of the world. A way of being together that invites dialogue, respect and listening to each other.

Who is our neighbour? Our neighbours are the members of our family and communities where we belong – near and far. Our neighbours are strangers and those different from us. Our neighbours are the little ones - ignored by society yet wanting our care and compassion. Our neighbours are the street marchers who confront those in power. Our neighbours are homeless people with the desire to have decent lives. Our neighbours are the privileged and the affluent, wanting to reach out for friendship and understanding. Our neighbours are those facing life’s

uncertainties because of illness or loss of employment. Our neighbours are those in our community wanting to be affirmed and welcomed. Our calling is also to become the neighbour we would like to meet. And you can only love your neighbour when you honestly and truthfully love God with your whole being – heart, soul and mind. To love God is to practice who and what God means to us. For me, God or the idea of God is the epitome of justice, compassion, kindness, peace and love. And even when we profess that we are God believers, agnostics or atheists, I believe these are universal values that each human being must put into practice for the world to heal from the atrocities of violence, hatred and evil. Loving God and our neighbour means that we need to listen to the world and engage with it. As cabin crew of love, we need to participate in endeavours that would bring healing to humanity's brokenness.

I watched a video clip of a man named Johnny Barnes. 91 year-old, Johnny Barnes, also known as Mr. Happy Man is a Bermuda native who embodies the LOVE that dwells in him. Barnes waves to passing traffic at the Foot of the Lane roundabout in Hamilton, Bermuda, from roughly 3:45 am to 10 am, every workday, rain or shine. As he waves, he says the words "I love you, God loves you," to passing commuters during the morning rush hour. He was there almost every day, until his "retirement" in December 2015. People don't understand why he does that – but he was able to inspire others by his peculiar gesture of love. Local radio stations reported receiving frantic calls when Barnes was not at his unofficial post. When people don't see him, they wonder where he is. Barnes identified himself as a religious man, a Seventh-Day Adventist who was motivated to share God's love for everyone. He credits his mother for teaching him goodwill and kindness to strangers. A life-size bronze statue of Barnes blowing kisses in the air was built by local business people in 1998 and was a living reminder of this loving man. Barnes died in 2016.

How do we practice love here at BCUC? How do you bring this love into your family? Into the community where you live? Into the world? We talk a great deal around here about embodying Christ in the world. Often, in our gatherings, in our songs and prayers, in our learning and playing, we express our desire to love and be LOVE in the world. If God who is Love is to be embodied in the world, then it is our mandate to reach out to people and places in need of love. Richard Rohr, a contemporary Franciscan priest and author, says that when we love, we experience ourselves as "in the flow." When we're in the flow, whatever it is we're

doing comes easily, organically, naturally. We are not constricted, boxed in but rather are open, with a felt sense that we have more than enough. When we are in the flow – when we are in love – there’s no measuring going on or counting or comparing or judging. When we are open to the energy of Love, we allow God, who is Love – to flow through us. When we love,” our hearts will be continually broken – shattered both by sorrow and by joy — and then our hearts will be remade, over and over and over again, each time made bigger and deeper than before. And that is how love is made present with one another and to the world.

On Friday, I received an email from the Ottawa Mayor’s office for an appeal to support the cause of peace in response to the ongoing war in Gaza and Israel. Mayor Sutcliffe’s message was loud and clear. He is calling us to love our neighbours. Let me read to you his letter:

Dear Ottawa residents,

This week I met with a group of religious leaders from throughout Ottawa to speak about the need to work together to ensure Ottawa remains safe and peaceful and to denounce all forms of hatred and discrimination, no matter what is happening in other parts of the world. I'm grateful to live in a city with strong faith leadership. Working together, we are releasing this Faith Leaders statement that has been signed by a number of clergy in our city. We encourage other faith leaders to add their voices to this message. We recognize that there is tremendous pain and grief in our city right now. While we may not agree on everything, and at times, it may seem like we agree on very little, here in Ottawa we have a commitment that we share with every good person in the world. We will never tolerate what is going on around the world to be used as a justification for any form of discrimination, violence or hatred in our city. We request the wonderful residents of our beloved city to join us in calling out all forms of hatred, and to never glorify or take joy in violence. We urge everyone to never allow our ideologies, religious beliefs, or political positions to become a cause for hatred of another human being.

We are all neighbours. We stand with each other and against all forms of hate now and forever. Thank you. *Signed Mark Sutcliffe and a list of clergy and faith leaders from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.*

A wilderness time is in our midst. So much humanitarian aid, prayers and understanding are required. On this 3rd Sunday in our Stewardship Campaign, as we commit once more to making

genuine love possible, please be reminded that we are all given many gifts, but One Spirit of Love that binds us at such a time as this and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.