

By Rev. David N. Glesne, November 15, 2009

Title: "Loving Your Neighbor: What does love mean?"

Text: Mark 12:30-31

Because of the historic importance of the road we as a church are currently on, the road of responding to the ELCA vote on human sexuality this past August, I am devoting today and next Sunday to the shaping of that response. As most of you know, I have been deeply involved in this matter both leading up to, during, and following the CWA.

At its Assembly in August the ELCA voted to allow the blessing of same-sex unions marriage and to change its standards to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in committed same-sex relationships. With these actions, the ELCA has radically changed its relationship not only with Redeemer but with the overwhelming majority of churches in the world.

On May 7 of this year, at a conference of pastors of large ELCA churches in Tucson, Arizona, I stood in up in a room of pastors and spouses and in a Q & A session with Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson asked him to comment on a possible future scenario. I said, "Let's say that in August, at the CWA in Minneapolis, the 1000 plus voting members vote to fully embrace the Sexuality Study and the Rostering Recommendations with their view of tolerant love which approves of same-sex intercourse in committed, faithful, monogamous same-sex relationships. Let's say that the two documents are fully embraced.

There are many of us, however, who are persuaded that Christ's love for same-sex persons is a much deeper love than the tolerant love put forth in the two documents. We are persuaded that Jesus' love is a far more radical love which reaches all the way to the cross. We see in Christ's love a redemptive love that seeks to recover people for the kingdom of God for it is our understanding that willful, serial, unrepentant sin in a person's life puts them at risk for the kingdom of God. As such we are constrained by the love of Christ to love our same-sex neighbor with the same redemptive love.

My question, Bishop, is two-fold: In the new church that would emerge post CWA; first, how welcome will we be in that new church and second, will our voice of redemptive love for same-sex persons be tolerated at the synodical and Churchwide levels?"

The bishop stood there and was silent for some 15-20 seconds. He then slowly began to respond. In a way that was a bit hard to follow he tried to tell us that all people will be welcome in the new church but then he acknowledged that in the way my comments were articulated, he could see how such a vote could be church dividing.

That was three months before the CWA. We are now almost three months after. We now live in that new reality, in a new church that is emerging. What will be our response? For those visiting Redeemer this morning, I invite you in to the conversation

we are having. It has implications far beyond just this church. For those new to Redeemer this fall, I realize that many of you are here today because of this very issue. Today, I want to look at the issues of blessing same-sex unions and embracing non-celibate same-sex persons in ordained ministry in light of the Scriptures. I've got my teaching hat on today. Next Sunday, we will look at the matter of biblical authority in the church, acknowledging that the sexuality issues are not central but merely symptomatic of a deeper issue.

Our response as a church to the CWA actions, I believe, turns on how we live out Jesus' second great commandment. Scribes came to Jesus one day and asked him... (read Mark 12:28b-31a). We need to probe deeply into Jesus and these two love commandments. We need to do this because in our day this *love your neighbor as yourself* commandment is being used to affirm almost any sexual activity. "As long as you love him - her, it is OK. As long as the sexual activity is loving in motive, it is OK." But is that in fact what Jesus' command *love you neighbor* means? There are some serious problems with that way of thinking.

First, that way of thinking equates love with tolerance. But are the two equal? No, because some tolerant actions turn out to be unloving! Your four year old child touches a red hot stove. If as a parent you tolerate her playing with a hot stove, it is called parental abuse. State services take your child away from you and you go to jail. That is a tolerance that is not loving. That is why tolerance is never lifted up in Scripture as the supreme value. In fact, when tolerance is lifted up as the supreme value today, it winds up being exceedingly intolerant because invariably someone's brand of tolerance is lifted up and if you do not fit their mode of tolerance, you are labeled intolerant.

This is the essential view of the ELCA's new social statement on human sexuality. It embraces a tolerant view of love. But in deciding what love is, the statement completely skirts the truth question. What has God said? God speaks in both the O.T. and N.T. with one united and unwavering voice in condemning same-sex intercourse. But when you sever *love your neighbor* from truth, now what does love mean? It means what you make it out to mean. With regard to sexual matters, if you start with the premise that what we do sexually doesn't in the end really matter to God, then you will shape what love means in a certain direction.

The theologian Carl Braaten critiques the ELCA Social Statement in these words: "It depicts a God without wrath and without judgment. God's only response to sin is 'love'. God loves and cares for everybody; it doesn't matter what they do. God is a prisoner of his own love. He can't do anything else." But that is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is also a God of wrath and judgment in relation to everything that opposes his will.

If, however, you start where the Bible starts, that what we do sexually could get us thrown into hell and disqualify us from getting into the kingdom of God, that our sexual actions are that important to God, then you have a totally different perception of what love is. Now love means getting people to a place where they will live eternally with

God. So it all depends on what God says is right and wrong with regard to our sexual actions.

The second problem with this tolerant view of *love your neighbor* is that it suppresses the first great commandment. Jesus said the first great commandment is v. 29. Once we understand that we are to love God with everything within us, we see that things are not decided on a merely horizontal or social level. They are not decided just on how I may feel about something. We must raise questions on the vertical level: “What does God say? What does God want for our lives in terms of sexual purity?”

Now undoubtedly we realize that sex is incredibly pleasurable. And because it is, it is given to an incredible amount of self-justification. There are greedy people in the church, but you don’t see a greedy people’s liberation movement rise up in the church – at least not by that name. Why? Because we know greed is wrong! But you get a lot of sexual liberation movements in the church which are much more abhorrent to God. Why? Because sex is pleasurable and private in nature and our society has come to the conclusion that people pretty much get to decide for themselves what to do. And who are you to judge or say otherwise? But when you say that, you suppress the first great commandment which has to do with asking what God would have us do.

The third problem with this tolerant view of love is that it overlooks a context. When Jesus gives us the second great commandment, he quotes from Leviticus 19:18b, “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” But what is the context of Leviticus 19:18b? Well, it is Leviticus 19:17-18a immediately before it read vv. 17-18a. In other words, if your neighbor does wrong, you shall reprove your neighbor lest you incur guilt for failing to warn him.

Very, very frequently in the case of fornication, or adultery, or homosexual practice, the argument is, “Well two people just love each other and that should be enough.” Love there basically means tolerance and approval of what people do sexually. But in the midst of this commandment in Leviticus 19 is this statement that if your neighbor does wrong, you shall reprove him lest you incur guilt for not warning him. So here in a list of loving things to do toward one’s neighbor (not hating, not taking revenge, not holding a grudge) is another loving thing, i.e., it is loving to reprove your neighbor when your neighbor does wrong. It is a good thing.

And do you know what? Every parent knows that! Every parent knows that if they never disciplined their children for wrong doing, they would not be known as particularly loving parents. We just forget that in the church and in our relationship with each other.

The fourth problem with this tolerant view of love is that it sees an antithesis between compassionate outreach and intensified ethics. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day lived under a ton of very strict laws. They were legalists. No one adhered to the Law more strictly than the Pharisees. What is so intriguing is that Jesus held a stricter view of the Law than did the Pharisees! Listen to Jesus in Matthew 5: “*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Then he goes on and

closes some loopholes in the Law by giving these six antithesis. Six times Jesus says, *“You have heard it said, but I say to you....”* In other words, Jesus makes the Law even stricter and two of the six have to do with sexual conduct.

We have this portrait of Jesus in the church as a great candy man in the sky who gives us basically everything we want. But in reality Jesus had a stricter view of the Law than did the Pharisees. So why don't we think of Jesus as a Pharisee? I think the reason is because he combines his rigorous ethics with love. Jesus reaches out aggressively in love to the biggest violators of the command.

We have a tendency to think that in order to love someone – let's say someone in our family who commits sexual sin – I can't think that what they are doing is really that bad. Because if I think that what they are doing is really bad, it's really tough for me to love them. That is getting it all backwards! Jesus reaches out aggressively in love precisely because the bad things people do put them at great risk of not inheriting God's kingdom which he is proclaiming.

When does a swimmer most need a life preserver? When he is on land or when he is in the ocean drowning? He needs it when he is in the ocean drowning. The one who is violating the rigorous ethic Jesus is preaching is at greatest risk. Jesus sees their need and reaches out to them. That's why he says, *“I've come to bring wholeness, to save the lost, to heal the sick because the spiritually sick and lost need to be recovered.”*

Jesus tells the parable of leaving the 99 sheep and going and searching for the one lost one. The one lost sheep the shepherd is going out to rescue is really in danger. We are tempted to think, “What a stupid shepherd. You've basically got to chalk that straying sheep up in the lost column. When a sheep goes off into wolf territory you are not going to leave 99 at risk while you go get one! If I had a shepherd who did that I'd fire him.” But that is the way God works. God deeply desires to rescue those who are genuinely at highest risk.

So reaching out to the lost in love and holding to a strict moral ethic go hand in hand. But the church often goes in one direction or the other. It either says, “You are all going to hell and we are not going to do anything about it,” or “Everyone is saved and don't worry about God's ethical demand because we are all under grace.” Both get it equally wrong. Both are in effect consigning people to hell. That is the problem. Jesus weds both.

The Pharisees could not get their imaginations around the notion that both love and a strict moral demand should be wedded together. And if the church today pleads “It's too hard to do that”, then the church should quit being the church and become the Rotary Club (not that there is anything wrong with the Rotary Club which does great social work) but the Rotary Club is what it is and the church is what it is and the church's calling is to rescue souls eternally by any means necessary.

The faithful church then acknowledges the theme of judgment in Jesus' teaching. It teaches that willful, serial, unrepentant sin of an egregious sort can put a person at risk of not inheriting the kingdom of God. It is interesting that roughly 1/3 of Jesus' teaching is on judgment and warning. We have to take very seriously what Jesus said.

In John 3 the Scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman caught in adultery. The crowds want to stone the woman because that is what the Law of Moses commanded. But Jesus says 'no'. Why? Not because he believes adultery is a minor offense, but because he wants to reclaim her for the kingdom of God and dead people can't repent. Jesus tells the woman, "*Go and no longer be sinning.*"

Now that exact phrase appears earlier in John 5 where Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethzatha who was crippled from birth. Jesus heals this man and says "*no longer be sinning*" and then immediately adds this warning, "*Lest something worse happen to you.*" The implication for the woman caught in adultery is that there is something worse than being stoned. What is worse than being stoned to death? What is worse is being excluded from God's eternal presence, loss of eternal life through an unrepentant life. Jesus' love warns against eternal consequences of sinning. Jesus' love is not a tolerant love. Jesus' love is a redemptive love.

The Apostle Paul's understanding of love is the same as Jesus' understanding. In I Corinthians 5 there is this situation in the church where a man is living in an incestuous relationship with his step-mother. The church in Corinth is priding themselves for their ability to tolerate what this man is doing. But Paul says to them that they should rather mourn. Why? Because this man's eternal life is at stake and they are doing nothing to rescue him. By today's standards, it is the people who were tolerant of his behavior who were the loving ones. But we know looking back that the only one who really loved this man was Paul because he was willing to do what needed to recover him for the kingdom.

Paul tells the Corinthians not to associate with such offenders because they will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is clear as he goes on in I Corinthians 6 and reiterates the same vices of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God and ends by saying that some of them were such but are no longer. Paul believes this incestuous man, who is a professed Christian, and the community that is approving of what he is doing, are deceiving themselves. They deceive themselves in believing that this man could do this action in a serial, unrepentant way and still inherit the kingdom of God. Tolerance is not always loving. Paul's love is a love that warns that serial and unrepentant sinning puts a person at risk for inheriting the kingdom of God. Paul's love is a love that calls for repentance and a life of holy living. Paul's love is not a tolerant love. Paul's love is a redemptive love.

In the very next chapter, in I Corinthians 6, Paul again talks about not being deceived. In verse 9 Paul says, "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?*" He is talking about the incestuous man in Corinth who claims to be a believer. He is saying, "*Do you not realize that if you live an unrighteous life, you won't inherit the kingdom of God?*" Verse 9 says, "*Do not be deceived!*" What is the deception? The

deception is the belief that such persons who engage in such behavior can engage in it repeatedly and get away with it. In verse 9-10 Paul says, *“Do you not realize that if you live an unrighteous life, you won’t inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.”* Then he continues in verse 11, *“And this is what some of you used to be. BUT you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”* Your lives were characterized by such behavior but now they no longer are so characterized. There has been repentance. God had declared them no longer guilty. The blood of Christ had cleansed their sin. The Holy Spirit was making them holy.

Or in II Corinthians 12:21 we read Paul saying, *“I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practiced.”* Why does Paul fear he many have to mourn over them when he comes to them? Because they are continuing to sin! They are not repenting in the areas of sexual immorality. In what setting do you find a lot of mourning? One mourns at a funeral because someone has died. Paul is afraid he will come to them and have to mourn because they are dying spiritually and they are doing nothing about it. It is really the same setting as with the incestuous man in Corinth.

What does it mean then to love my neighbor as myself? And how does this speak to the new teaching of the ELCA? We want to be a faithful people who live in obedience to Jesus great commandments. I believe a response faithful to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures would include the following:

- We are called to hold firmly to Jesus’ view of marriage which is rooted in creation and in the two-ness of the sexes. We agree with him that sexual behavior is to be reserved for the one man, one woman marriage relationship. All sexual intercourse outside of the one man, one woman marriage relationship is sinful behavior: fornication, adultery, incest, bestiality, homosexuality
- We are called to be courageous and call sexual sin, sin, first in our own lives, and then in the lives of others. When our neighbor does wrong, we must love that neighbor enough to reprove him, to call him to repentance, lest we incur guilt for failing to warn him. In this area we as the people of God need to get our own house in order first. I would therefore say out of love, if you are living together and are not married, it is a serious matter to God and I urge you by this time next week to have separate addresses. How can we speak into the matter of homosexuality if we ourselves are living outside God’s will for us in this sexual area?
- Given the sinfulness of homosexual acts, a homosexually oriented person who engages in such acts with another and is unrepentant ought no more be accepted

into the ordained ministry than a heterosexual person engaged in extra-marital sexual relationships who is unrepentant.

- We are called to love our neighbors with the redemptive love of Christ. Jesus has redeemed sinners like you and me. In His amazing and undeserved grace he forgives us for Christ's sake. We in turn must boldly proclaim God's grace, His forgiveness of sins and restoration through the cross of Jesus Christ. In Christ's death and resurrection, God provides both freedom from the guilt of sin and through the power of the Holy Spirit, freedom from the power of sin enabling us to live holy lives.
- Wherever we are on the Discipleship Pathway, as we move toward Christ-likeness, like Jesus we must aggressively reach out in love to the sinners and tax collectors of our day. Jesus fraternized with them, invited himself into their homes, ate with them, preached the kingdom of God, focused his ministry mostly on them for the express purpose of recovering them for the kingdom of God. While others in the religious establishment of his day didn't care that they were being destroyed eternally because of their sin, Jesus cared and reached out to them in love. This is Redeemer's calling. This is my calling. This is your calling.

We will be faithful to that calling.

Prayer.