

26.3.1 “Love of God and Neighbor” — Meditation by Rev. Adam Hange

Good news God,
speak louder than the news updates.
Speak louder than our mental distractions.
Speak louder than our anger and louder than our fear.

God, speak loudly to us today,
because we long to hear your good news once more.
With hope we pray, amen.

This morning, my heart feels heavy. Perhaps yours does too. Yesterday, we woke to news of violence and war, nations striking nations, lives disrupted, families afraid, futures suddenly uncertain. And, I confess, sometimes words feel small in moments like this. I confess, it left me feeling angry, and depressed, to think of our country being drawn into another war.

Rather than trying to explain anything... I thought, Perhaps it's best to return to the core tenets of our faith. That is what we hoped to do this Lent — return to the taproot of our tradition. The life and teachings of Jesus. If you want to be righteous, Jesus says the greatest commandment is this: Love God. And love your neighbor as yourself. Simple words. And yet, perhaps the highest and most difficult calling we have. Love God. And love your neighbor as yourself.

For this series, I've been trying to find and share “good news” stories. Stories of people doing just that... Loving God and Neighbor. I came across a story that's become well-known in the PC(USA). It's the story of Danielle and Kevin Riley.

More than a decade ago, the couple was addicted to drugs and living in poverty in Northwest Washington. They were homeless, struggling with addiction. Life had narrowed to survival. Danielle wrote, “I don't think I was exactly suicidal, but I wouldn't have minded if my life ended.” They found themselves sleeping outside of a local church. Members of that church did something small, yet significant.

They ran an electric cord outside, at night, so Kevin could charge a phone, and a heating pad. Nothing dramatic. Just one small, quiet act of care.

Danielle was three months pregnant when she went to jail. There, she began attending Bible study. Two pastors visited week after week, reminding her she was not forgotten. She was a beloved child of God. And nothing she did or failed to do would change that. Slowly, healing began. After their release, they found a church community. They shared their story. As the couple got clean and sober, the two were eventually called to ministry as Co-Commissioned Pastors at Mount Baker Presbyterian Church in Concrete, Washington, a small town about an hour north of Seattle.

What is the good news message they preach, time and again? “No one is beyond resurrection.” If it can happen to us, it can happen to anyone. Their success is not that they said a prayer, and suddenly everything became easy. Rather, they trace it to the fact that someone chose to see them as neighbors. Someone saw them and was moved by empathy and compassion.

In our reading today, Jesus attends another dinner, hosted by a man named Simon. We don't know how he came to be at this dinner, or how many were there, or much at all. All we know is that an unnamed woman enters, described only as “a sinner.” She says nothing. She kneels at Jesus' feet, weeping. Her tears wash away the dust of the road. She wipes his feet with her hair and anoints them with precious perfume. The host, Simon, silently judges her. “If he were a prophet,” Simon thinks, “he would know what kind of woman this is.” But Jesus sees something different. He sees her, and he sees him. Then he does what he does best. He tells a story.

He tells a story about debts forgiven, and then he turns his face toward the woman and speaks words that mean more than forgiveness as we usually imagine it. Your faith has saved you, you are forgiven. The word is *aphesis*, which means not pardon, but release. Freedom. Liberation. She is released, not only from sin, but from shame. From isolation. From being defined by how others see her. And

perhaps the deeper question in the story is not whether she is forgiven, but whether Simon might also be released from his judgment, prejudice, and pride.

In Luke chapter 4, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus announced his purpose: to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed. Release. It is striking how deeply every human being longs for that. Release from fear. Release from despair. Release from hatred — even the hatred we sometimes carry without realizing it. When we look honestly, we begin to see how alike we all are. All of us want to be safe. All of us want our children to live. All of us want dignity. All of us want to belong. There is a kind of religion in America today which preaches us vs. them, which calls empathy a sin, and draws the line between who is our neighbor and who is our enemy at our nation's borders.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once reminded us that “neighbor” is not a geographical term. Neighbor is not limited by borders or nationality. Neighbor is anyone whose life is bound up with ours, which we understand more and more is everyone and everything. And so today, we sit with a painful truth: the people living in fear under the barrage of bombs, they are our neighbors too. Iranian families are our neighbors. And we have neighbors here with families there. While some may be dancing in celebration over the end of a terrible repressive regime, others are weeping and mourning over the bombing of a girls' school. Every one, a neighbor.

When fear rises, when leaders speak in ways that divide the world into enemies and allies, followers of Christ are called to remember something deeper. We are called to love. Not sentimentally. Not abstractly. But faithfully. Boldly. We are called to speak peace when anger feels louder. To resist hatred when it feels justified. To refuse to let anyone be reduced to an “other.” Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Not the powerful. Not the victorious. The peacemakers.

In just a few moments, we will come to this table. A table where strangers become neighbors. Where enemies are not named, only guests. Where no nation has priority, and no person is excluded. At this table, we remember a love strong

enough to face violence without becoming violent, a love willing to be broken rather than used to break others. Here, Christ gathers us, not because we have solved the world's suffering, but because we hunger for another way to live. We come carrying grief. We come carrying hope. We come needing release. And here we are reminded again: no one is beyond resurrection. No one is beyond liberation. No one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. So as we come forward today, may we remember our neighbors, be they near or far. May this bread strengthen us for compassion. May this cup deepen our courage for peace. And may God make us, even in a wounded world, people of love. Amen.