

Mission: Love People
317 Vision Series

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February 2, 2020

Little bit of follow-up from last week. I gave everyone a public service announcement that Valentine's Day was coming up. Guys, don't forget that. I mentioned that Keren loves flowers; it's like, instead of the rest of us who have 5 love languages—words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, physical touch, gifts—she has 6, and her sixth love language is flowers. Two things happened. One, a wonderful, sweet girl in our church heard that, and on Sunday night brought Keren some flowers at our house. So, so kind. There was another teenage girl at our church, and when she heard me say that Keren has a sixth love language and that hers is flowers, she leaned over to her dad and said, "I have a sixth love language too. Mine is bacon." She's off to a good start in life!

We are in a series called 317 where we are sharing our vision, mission, and priorities as a church, and talking about what it means for us to be a church not just *in* the 317, but *for* the 317, not just *in* our community, but *for* our community. So far we have talked about our singular vision: to connect people to Jesus. Last week we talked about the first part of our three-fold mission: Love God, Love People, Make Disciples. Today, we get to talk about what it means for us to be a church that is focused on loving people.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28)

So this guy gets it right. What does God want us to do? Love him and love people. But then this expert in the law wanted to make sure he knew exactly what kind of people God was expecting him to love. It's one thing to love your family and your friends, but just how many people do I have to love as myself? Look:

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers." (Luke 10:29-30a).

This was a well-known stretch of road to Jesus' audience. It was 17 miles long, it had a 3,300 feet in elevation change, and it had a well-established reputation as one of the most dangerous roads around. Take a look at a modern day picture of that area [photo of hilly desert area]. Do you see just how easy it would be for a group of thugs to hide around one of those hills, descend on a traveler, take his possessions and leave him for dead? That's exactly what happened in this story.

"They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." (Luke 10:30b-32)

The priest and Levite were religious professionals. In modern times it would be like a pastor, or Christian counselor, or a professor at a Christian school. And even though you hope that these religious people are going to help him, they just pass by on the other side. Why would they do that? These are two guys who loved God, who prided themselves on being good people. Why would they just walk by and leave this guy on the road to die? Maybe they were in a hurry; maybe they didn't want to stop and maybe risk being attacked themselves; maybe they thought it was karma...hey, if God allowed something bad to happen to this guy, who are we to intervene? We don't know why for sure, but we know that they did...they left him there, presumably to die.

“But a Samaritan...”

It's hard for us to appreciate the hush that would have fallen over the crowd when Jesus introduced this third character, the Samaritan. Ethnically speaking, Samaritans were half Jewish and half foreigners. They were considered a “mixed breed,” they were hated, they were despised. Jews wouldn't even set foot on Samaritan territory. When Jesus mentioned the Samaritan, you can almost imagine the people who were listening interrupting and saying, “Boo, boo, boo, get him out of here, I hope he gets jumped, too!” But to everyone's surprise...

“...as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.” (Luke 10:33)

That phrase “took pity” is the same word used in the Old Testament to describe the compassion of God toward humanity in need. It means to be stirred from within. Compelled. Moved in your core to do something.

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” (Luke 10:34-35)

What kindness! He stops what he's doing, places himself in harm's way, puts him on his donkey, takes him to an inn, pays for his bill in advance and then says, if it costs more, I'll take care of that, too. Unbelievable kindness. And then Jesus asks:

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36-37)

What's the point of this passage? Like the priest and the Levite, it is not enough for us to believe in God, for us to be religious, go to church, read the Bible, say our prayers; we have to love people. Not hypothetical people. Not people on the other side of the world. The real people God puts in our lives, who we see on a daily basis...we have to love them, serve them, bless them, and if they have needs, we have to meet them!

Do you want to know how important loving people is to Jesus? On the last night of his life, Jesus said to his followers: **“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples....”** And how do you think Jesus would finish that sentence: If you go to church every week, if you read my Bible every day, if you say your prayers? **“...if you love one another” (John 13:35).** This is what we

are supposed to be known for. After loving God, more important than anything else is loving people.

That is how the followers of Jesus turned the world upside down in the first few centuries following Jesus' life. In 1996, a world-renowned sociologist at Washington University named Rodney Stark wrote a book called *The Rise of Christianity* (one of 28 books he's published). He is not an evangelical Christian, he's a professor, a researcher, and as such he wanted to find the answer to this question: How did Christianity take over the western world?

In the year 33 AD, just months following Jesus' resurrection, there were 5,000 Christians in the city of Jerusalem—0.008% of the [Roman] Empire's population. Within 300 years, there were almost 35 million Christians, and they represented over 50% of the Empire's population. How does that happen? In the midst of their faith being outlawed, their people being persecuted, and their leaders being exiled to deserted islands, dipped in pitch and lit on fire, thrown to lions in the coliseum—how did Christians overcome the world? How did the pantheon of Roman gods end up being entirely forgotten, and the Empire left worshipping Jesus, a Jew they'd killed a few centuries before?

From a sociological perspective, that's a fascinating question. Again, he's not a Christian, but in all the research that [Stark] did, his entire book, here was his answer: *The Christians won the world by their love*. They adopted children exposed to the elements; when most people fled cities struck with plagues, they went into those cities and nurtured the sick and dying; they bandaged the sores of lepers; they shared their bread during famine. They loved the world in a way no one had ever seen before. And the world responded to their love and placed their faith in Jesus.

We need a revolution like that in our day. About 500 years ago, under the influence of Martin Luther, history witnessed a reformation. Five hundred years ago the church had lost its mission and purpose. Instead of connecting people to Jesus, instead of loving God and loving people and making disciples, the church was selling indulgences, the church started taking advantage of people for their own political and financial gain, and spiritually speaking, the church became increasingly irrelevant.

In 1517 Martin Luther took 95 critiques against the church and nailed them to the university door, saying, the church has lost its focus. If you could boil all of his 95 concerns down to just three phrases, here's what they would be:

Sola Scriptura: Which means we don't need creeds and catechisms and long books telling us what to believe and what to do, we just need the **Bible** [scripture].

Sola Gratia: Which means we don't have to do anything to merit or earn salvation, it is given as a gift, it's **grace**.

Sola Fide: Which means that the way we receive God's grace is through placing our **faith** in Jesus Christ.

This was the battle cry of the reformation. And for 500 years theologians have built upon that, expanded upon that, written libraries of books about that. But we need a new reformation today. Five hundred years later, the reformation the world needs now can be summed up in two Latin words: ***Amo Dei***. The love of God. If we want to see our world won for Christ, if we want to see a transformation like we've seen in centuries gone by, there is only one way it will come about:

if we show people the love of God. In every interaction we have, here's the challenge: ask God, "What's your heart for this person? Show me how much you love this person and the good plans and hopes you have for their life, and then, in every interaction, might my life be a mirror reflection of your love for them."

Not long ago I was on a blog called, "Why I left religion." It wasn't a small blog with a few posts; hundreds and hundreds of people shared their stories. And reading them was heartbreaking. After sifting through dozens, do you know what shocked me? Almost no one left the Christian faith because they stopped believing in Jesus. They had no problem believing that God created the world, they had no problem believing that the Bible is true, they had no problem believing that Jesus rose from the dead. Do you know why they left the faith? *Because they weren't loved by Christians.* People complained about the gossipy, judgmental women at their office who went to Sunday School every weekend; a woman shared about her father who was a deacon for 20 years, who abused her and her siblings; someone else described the cliques that made it clear that even though God says we are equal, clearly some people were considered to be less important than others.

Our ability to connect people to Jesus rises and falls on our willingness to love people like Jesus has loved us. Listen to what we read in **1 Corinthians 13:1-3**:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Think about that statement. Paul is saying that you can be a person who has taken every penny you own and given to the poor. Let's pretend you are absurdly wealthy and have ten million dollars and you have given every last dime to the poor. And not only that, but you have so much faith that when you pray, things really happen. You've actually prayed before and Mount Everest got a little bit taller, Mount Saint Helen started rumbling, the Rocky Mountains shifted several hundred yards to the east—we are talking about scientifically verifiable and undeniable stuff. You are so gifted that when you speak, people from every other language can listen to you and understand what you are saying. There is not a person on the planet you cannot communicate with. Oh, and you've been beaten and imprisoned for the Gospel. Let's say all those things are true of you, so you naturally assume that when you have the chance to talk to your neighbor or coworker or friend about God, they are really going to listen; who wouldn't want to hear what I have to say?

But if you don't love them really, really well, then even though you have everything else going for you, this is all they hear. "Hey, I'd like to tell you about Jesus...CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG." "Can I tell you about the difference faith can make in your life...CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG." If you don't have love, they won't listen to you. Why would they? People don't need another theory. They need love.

What kind of love do people need? Listen to how the passage continues:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of

wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

And now skip down with me to the end of the chapter, verse 13: “**And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**” Paul says the three most important things in the world are faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Just a few weeks ago I got an incredible email from a woman in our church who shared about the impact that was made in someone’s life by the power of love.

“Hi Dan, I attend the Creek and work for Hope Center (the hope center is a wonderful ministry nearby that helps women who have been trafficked have a safe place to heal, recover, be loved, and find the Lord). I wanted you to know that today, one of our brave women received an amazing gift from our church’s Generous Bucket. After a rough life, this young lady came to us searching for one last hope. Her life has been transformed by the grace of God, and today, thanks to our church, she received a new set of teeth.

“The moment these women come through our doors, we teach them that they are made in God’s image and are deeply loved, but for her to receive a gift like that shows her that she truly is loved and that we really do want to care for her like family. She is still in shock that someone would do something like that for her. The Creek gives so much more than money. The Creek gives hope to people who, for a long time, believed they were not worth it. Thank you for showing her that the Creek loves her, but more importantly that God loves her.”

That’s what this church is about. That’s why we do our generous ministry! Do you know that since we started putting the orange buckets out we have given over \$2.2 million to our neighbors who have needed a little encouragement and a hand up—\$2.2 million as an expression of love! So many lives have been touched. And I’m excited to let you know that we are making a few adjustments to make our generous process even more powerful. In the past, if someone had a need, they would come to the church, share their need, and after an evaluation process, we would determine if we could meet that need. We will still do that, but we want to equip the people in our church to be generous advocates as well.

So now, let’s say that you and your life group become aware of a need. A medical bill. A house repair. A car situation. And you feel called to help. You and your family, you and your life group want to tangibly show the love of Christ to this person. You can recommend them for the Generous Ministry. You can say, “The need is \$2,000. With my resources, and our life group, we can pool together \$800.” And then, if the evaluation process is approved (we want to be wise and good stewards, of course), we will be able to cover the remainder of the need. Your resources, pooled with the church’s resources, enabling you to show the love of Christ to people in your life. Do you see the subtle but significant shift? We are moving it away from people coming to the *church* to have their needs met, toward empowering *you* to meet people’s needs. That new process is live starting today. You can get online and check it out.

And speaking of loving people and meeting their needs, I want to share a little more about what we are going to do the Sunday after Easter.* On April 19th we are going to worship differently than usual. Instead of gathering here for an hour like we usually do, we are going to worship by loving people in our community. We are going to be in schools and parks and retirement homes,

we are going to pick up trash, and do yard work, and connect with people. We are going to prepare gifts for people in our city who need encouragement.

There are two major ways you can participate. Primary way: DIY projects with people you know, needs you are aware of, parks you know need to be cleaned, yard projects you know need to be worked on, a neighbor's fence you know needs repair, etc. Do these with your life group. Invite friends who don't go to church to join you. You can get online on our website and tell us what you are up to. The only rules: don't be weird, don't be dangerous. A second way to participate: do Anchor projects. Come to the church, and we'll send you out to a site.

Friends, as a church, we have a vision: to connect people to Jesus. And we have a mission that we are going to carry out to accomplish that vision: Love God and love people. Come back next week and we'll talk about what it looks like to make disciples.

***UPDATE: The service day has been postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Check back later for a revised schedule.**