

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 5, 2021 – More Than a Slogan  
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 and James 2:1-7**

We teach school children that they ought to treat others as they wish to be treated themselves. This is an early lesson in empathy, rooted in what Jesus called the Greatest Commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” As human creatures who are hard-wired to desire what is in our own best interest, this idea of loving others can feel rather counter-intuitive, at first. Yet, in the process of opening our hearts, we gradually increase our capacity for empathy. Slowly, we become Christ’s hands and feet. And, in time, generous acts flow so freely that we barely even notice how giving we have become.

Thankfully, others do. Our neighbors easily recognize the embodiment of love within us. They sense the warmth. The kindness. The understanding. And they know that we would help them. All that they would ever need to do is ask. Yet, to call ourselves Christians is to have our lives evaluated in ways that may make us feel uncomfortable. Not even a hypocrite wishes to be called one. And in an effort to avoid that unsavory label, we push ourselves just a little bit harder in the hope that we will finally attain perfection.

It then comes as some surprise when, in the midst of our striving, we inevitably come up short. Gazing in a mirror dimly, the depth of our human frailty begins to emerge. And confronted with our mortality, we sense that we cannot earn God's favor. For even if the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.

This is why ministers throughout the ages have answered the call to rise up. In robes, they stand atop ornate pulpits stationed in the lofty cathedrals of the world's greatest cities. And in simple attire, itinerant servants proclaim the good news in one-room shacks. Together, they profess their faith in the grace of God as the means of our salvation.

In unity of purpose, they remind us that God's love is not a commodity to be bought or sold. And whether we are rich or poor, we receive God's grace in the very same way. It is always a gift. This gift, however, is not like most. Grace is not our exclusive possession. We have no right to hoard or squander it. Instead, we are meant to pass it on. To share it. To gift it to others. It is like living water. There is more than enough grace to go around.

In my role as a parent, few things have been as fulfilling as watching our children play nicely together. Sharing. Taking turns. Cooperating. Using kind words.

Modeling the behaviors that we teach in our home. In those moments, you recognize that they get it. That they understand the lessons that you have worked so hard to convey. You sense that they have internalized those teachings, and you see that they are capable of enacting those virtues that will make them loyal family members and honorable citizens.

On a grander scale, this is the same kind of work that we seek to accomplish in the church, by shaping and molding disciples of Jesus in the image of divine goodness, rooted in compassionate, self-giving love. Yet, the issues that we face here are numerous. Complicated and multi-faceted, rarely do they lend themselves to easy solutions or popular slogans.

Just consider this example from one of my former congregations. One morning, a smelly, disheveled looking man with a backpack entered the sanctuary just prior to the worship hour and began asking our members for money. The ushers found me and explained that this same individual had also been using the sink in the men's restroom to clean himself.

Not knowing the man's mental state or what he might be carrying in his backpack, I approached him with caution. I introduced myself as a minister of the

congregation and told him, “You are welcome to worship here with us, but you cannot ask those around you for money.” I didn’t even mention the restroom. Yes. He had left it a bit dirtier than it was before, but it seemed like a sign of God’s compassion that he would depart our fellowship with a cleaner look and a bit more dignity.

Most parents will tell you that setting clear boundaries for their children is a form of love, both for the parent and for the child. Likewise, loving our neighbors does not mean that we ought to adopt an anything goes policy. In most situations, we can kindly explain our boundaries and still convey the love of God without being overly harsh or dismissive.

When I told that story about the man with the backpack, you were likely reminded that we live in a world where unstable individuals have opened fire in schools and in sanctuaries. We are not naïve, and we are right to be concerned for our safety. It is understandable that we analyze each interaction, attentive to one’s body language and mood, tone and language. We judge others by the cleanliness of their appearance, their posture, and the clothes that they wear for we are wary of wolves in sheep’s clothing, and we are mindful of threats.

But to remain in that place forever is to cut ourselves off from others, and to insulate ourselves from real, human needs. As disciples of Christ, let us remember that we are always called upon to seek out the lost, to serve the poor, and to restore the dignity of the oppressed. Loving our neighbors is more than a slogan. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.