

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law. The commandments “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet;” and any other commandment are summed up in this word: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Matthew 18:20

...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.

## **SERMON**

Getting to Know You

Pastor Jamie

A long time ago, in a land far, far, away, a 16 year old boy was kidnapped by pirates and taken to an island where he was made a slave by the people of the island. The boy was sold to one of the tribal chiefs and priests of these people, and put to work herding cattle. The boy had been born into a family that practiced Roman ways, and had been raised as a Christian, although he had not been terribly devout and tended to be a bit wild.

While the young man was enslaved by these people he considered to be “Barbarians,” several profound changes occurred in his life. He experienced a great deal of isolation in the wilderness while he was herding cattle, and there in the wilderness he began to experience God in the winds, the seasons, the creatures, and even the stars. God began to be increasingly real to him in this wilderness, and he found himself praying many times each day. His faith grew and his spirit was encouraged, and he became a devout and passionate Christian.

When he spent time with his captors in the settlement, he began to understand the people who had bought him. He learned their language and their culture in a profound way, the way enslaved people have often done, often understanding the culture better than the captors themselves. As he learned more about them, he came to love them, and as his love for God grew in the wilderness, his love for this people grew and he longed for these people to know God in the way he had come to know God.

One night, some six years after he had been captured, the young man had a dream. In his dream he heard a voice saying: “You are going home. Look! Your ship is ready!” The voice told him to run away the next morning, and awakening before dawn he slipped away and walked to the seacoast. He saw a ship at anchor, negotiated passage, and made his way home.

Years passed and the young man became a priest, and then a bishop; but he never forgot the people that had captured him, and whom he had come to love. He requested that he be sent back to these people so that he could bring to them knowledge of the Christian God. He returned with a few priests, some students, and some other supportive folk.

With the Bishop’s knowledge of the people, this small group of Christians received permission to set up a small monastic community near a tribe. They spent time growing food, trading with their neighbors, healing people who came to them, sharing stories of early Christians, and loving one another. The people liked what they saw as they watched the monastery and they began to appreciate the triune God that the community worshipped. In a relatively short period of time, most of the people in the tribe had embraced Christianity—a Christianity that had taken on some of the elements of their faith as well.

The young man was Patrick... the island was Ireland... and this first monastic community was the beginning of a successful outreach of Christianity to a people with multiple gods. Patrick’s mission was so successful that by the end of his life, 700 churches had been established in Ireland, and 1000 priests ordained. By raising a hand in love rather than anger or retribution, 1/3 of all the tribes in Ireland had been converted to Christianity with the flavor of the Irish religion that had come before.

Patrick was a great evangelist, following in the tradition of Paul, the first evangelist to the “pagan” or “barbarian” peoples. Both men knew the power of love in transforming people. Paul writes about it in his letter to the Church in Rome that we read today: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments . . . are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love is the fulfilling of the law;” and, both knew that in order to truly love another, one needs to know them.

Paul would also come into a new community, get to know the people around him as he worked his business, and tell them about the God he knew. He would listen to what they knew of their gods and what was important to them and he would tell them how his God could also touch their souls. People watched how Paul conducted his business, they listened to his arguments that made sense in their understanding of the world . . . and they converted to Christianity. Paul would leave the community with a church established and move on.

The difference between these two great leaders of Christianity was the communities into which they brought the message of God made known in Jesus. The Greeks and Romans had a dialectic understanding of body and soul being separate from one another, and they learned through dialogue and debate; the Irish accepted paradox as a given, and they best understood a God that was in and through all things, body and soul connected. They learned through poetry, story, and song. The wisdom of both St. Paul and St. Patrick was in their ability to know the people well enough to tell Jesus’ story in such a way that the people were transformed.

We all want to be known and understood. We want to find a place where we can belong and bring our questions, as well as our hopes and joys. We often call such a place “home;” it is the place where people not only know our names, but understand the things that are important to us and why. We want a place where we can be our authentic selves, people who make mistakes, who sometimes don’t live up to the ideal of Jesus’ Gospel of love, but who earnestly love God and seek to live in peace with one another.

Sometimes people look at today’s church and think that they don’t see this loving practice. They listen to the news on TV and radio, and they hear hateful rhetoric in the name of Christianity; or they hear of different traditions of the Body of Christ speaking out against one another. People look out into the world and see that there are still far too many who are hungry and homeless and wonder at the effectiveness of this Christian model. And, there is some truth in what people on “the outside” of our churches have sometimes seen and heard.

Jesus made following him easy. “It’s not all about a collection of rules and laws,” he said. “It is as simple as loving God and loving your neighbor; if you do these things then you are following in my footsteps.” It is all about how we treat each other; we are the ones who make it so much harder with the rules that we have put into place.

The Greeks and Romans who followed after Paul saw an effective and compassionate love in the relationships of the disciples who gathered together. The Irish saw the same in the monastic community relationships that grew up beside their tribal homes; it looked so good, other peoples wanted to follow the model. Jesus said that when two or three people gather together, he will be among us, so the essence of discipleship is to practice loving one another because God will be in our midst; if we love each other, we are practicing loving God.

Both Paul’s model and Patrick’s model came about in ancient times, but still obviously have much to teach us. There are, however, other models today that are seeking to teach us the ways in which we can live in community with one another, practicing loving one another and providing a living, breathing model for others to experience. One modern model is the Sojourner’s community in

Washington D.C.; another model is the monastic community in Iona, Scotland; still another model is the monastic community in Taizé, France.

This last community is the one whose music and worship style has helped to shape our Wednesday night worship that the students design and lead. But even more than music and style, we are being guided by the community's beginnings as a place of reconciliation and love for all Christians, particularly seeking to bridge the divide between Protestants and Catholics. These ecumenical worship experiences welcome all followers of Christ to worship together in love and truth. As Pastor Larry and one of our student's put it on Wednesday night, the authentic spirit that fills this worship has led many to say that they truly feel "at home" in a place far from their physical homes.

Both Paul and Patrick taught the value of "getting to know" the people around you in order to love them and teach the lessons of Christ. It is when we truly understand how others experience God that we can make our church a home, a place where people are transformed and disciples are grown. We welcome you to this place! May it be a place where you experience the love of God in the community of Christ's followers. Amen.