

Sermon – Sunday, June 26, 2022

Rev. Randi

Throughout the summer, we'll be reflecting on discipleship – how we walk along life's journey with Jesus. The walk isn't always easy. Sometimes it involves great sacrifice.

When we talk about loving God and our neighbor, we tend to think of this commandment as a happy one. Perhaps we think to ourselves,

"Oh, love. That's fun. That's easy. I enjoy loving."

But love isn't always so straightforward because to truly love, we have to really open up our hearts. We must open up our whole selves to God and our neighbors. We have to be vulnerable. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable being vulnerable. We can be badly hurt that way. To defend ourselves from hurt, sometimes we only open up part of ourselves to others. To avoid disappointment, we only open up a piece of ourselves to God, too. We love guardedly.

I want to share a story with you about what happens when we are too guarded in our love vs. when we open our hearts fully to love.

Some researchers wanted to study a group of gorillas who lived together in something similar to a camp. Every day, the researchers left their base camp to try getting close to the gorillas to study them. They packed up their jeeps with all their provisions and took their guns just in case. After all, you never know what will happen when you get close to gorillas.

And, every day, the gorillas refused to let the researchers get anywhere close to them. Day after day, the routine was the same.

Finally, one researcher decided to try to leave his guns behind. He decided to risk getting close to the gorilla without having anything to defend himself. He opened his whole heart without reservation.

When he did that, the gorillas let him come close enough to study them. In fact, they even invited the researcher to share their camp with them. All it took to get close to these animals was for the researcher to stop being so defensive and to be vulnerable instead. He had to be willing to approach the gorillas being fully open to whatever would happen.ⁱ

Sometimes we approach other people the way the researchers initially approached the gorillas. We probably don't literally bring our guns with us. But we do put up defenses sometimes. We aren't really all "in" when we approach others. We hold something back so that we can defend ourselves from being hurt. We probably do this because we've been hurt in the past. But, in doing so, we fail to get really close to others. When we fail to get close, we can't love them completely and perfectly like Jesus wants us to love others.

Jesus dealt with rejection. Jesus knows he will face the ultimate sacrifice as he continues to move to Jerusalem. But he continues with his mission, and he keeps loving. Jesus died for all those who wouldn't leave everything and follow Him. Jesus died for people who scorned Him and denied Him. Jesus died for us. Jesus could have held back a part of Himself. He could have defended Himself against the cross. He could have loved his disciples less when they abandoned him. He could have avoided choosing Judas as his disciple to prevent himself from being hurt by Judas's betrayal, but he didn't.

Jesus teaches us to love unreservedly as well. Every fruit of the Spirit seems to revolve around love. Love is patient and kind. Love seeks peace. Love is generous and faithful. Love is gentle. But we must open up to love to have these fruits of the Spirit. We can't try to draw close to others while bearing psychological weapons of self-defense.

How do we do this? For many of us, these psychological weapons of self-defense come from previous hurts. While psychotherapy is part of the healing for some, complete healing can never occur until we truly begin to trust God. When we truly open ourselves up to God and spend time with God, we find that our heart becomes more open. Our openness to love others comes out of our experience of the unconditional love of God for us. It comes from following Jesus every day, communicating with Jesus every day, and learning to forgive and love ourselves as Jesus loves us. It comes from letting the Spirit guide us.

True love of God and neighbor only comes when we lay down our defenses and allow ourselves to be vulnerable. When we do that, we are truly free to love. And we'll find out that others will lay down their defenses and be vulnerable with us, too.

Open your heart and love fully. Leave your defensive weapons at the door.

¹ Tamara Levitt shared this story in her daily meditation podcast on June 23