

SCRIPTURE: Amos 7:7-8a (Time with Children)

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:25-29

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (And Jesus told him the parable of the Good Samaritan.)

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 82

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

“How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”

They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you;

nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!

REFLECTION: “Of Lawyers and Law, Judges and Justice” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Before I start my sermon today, a couple of things. Being a pastor is a wonderful thing. It is a thing where we get to look at the fullness of life. It is a thing where we get to tackle the realness of the world. It is a thing where we humbly have to figure out how to address how we see our faith, how we read the Scriptures, and do it in a community of people that I don’t get to preach to and leave, but then get to see tomorrow.

In the United Church of Christ, there is a guiding principle that in things that are essential, we must have agreement. And yet the only thing in the United Church of Christ that is regarded as essential is that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. That's it. Who Jesus is and why he matters.

In non-essentials but things that are yet important to us, we are called to have diversity, to freely express difference of opinions, to recognize how I read Scripture may not be the way you do. But that together we're called by the Spirit into a greater working out of those things together over time, a way of life bound together.

And the third is that in all other things, charity. Compassion. Forgiveness. Love.

So over these past few weeks, amidst all the turmoil in our nation and abroad, these texts about love, these texts about Godly judges and human ones, these texts about plumb lines didn't allow me the comfort of turning away. And yet as I preach the sermon that I'm going to preach today, it is mindful that tomorrow or even after this service, I will greet you, I will love you, I will be in Spirit with you, whether you want to shout amen at the end of what I say, or whether you'd rather get up and walk out. Because that's what faith is all about, a stubborn clingingness to one another to work through things.

The second thing I need to say before I preach this sermon is to remember a really important truth. And I'm hoping that someone can help me with that truth right now. (Brent's son Jake sings "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.")

And now with those truths dancing on our hearts, will you pray with me. God of love and life, send down your Spirit. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Given the enormity of the issues of our world today, what does love have to do with any of it? What does love have to do with the Supreme Court of the land, and decisions that have stoked fear and division, wonder, curiosity. What does love have to do with women being denied bodily autonomy? What does love have to do with Creation groaning under the weight of greed and choked by pollution, and yet the Court saying let it go. What does love have to do with the separation of church and state starting to become ever more blurred? What does love have to do with the integrity of democracy being imperiled? What does love have to do with the proliferation of gun violence erupting at parades and on city streets, assassinations of regular citizens and beloved leaders, too? What does love have to do with the stress of inflation, the agony of war, the pain of division, and the worry over what might be next? Quite frankly, everything.

But how can love possibly stand in the way of powers like the Supreme Court? Powers like corporate lobbyists. Powers like Christian nationalists. Weapons like assault rifles or guided missiles, and those who would use them. How does love possibly compete with social media influencers whose sole goal is to undermine trust and sow confusion? Quite frankly, it is the *only* thing. And I think we kid ourselves if we think otherwise.

A little side note: When I told my son Jake about the song that I put into your weekly email (Jackie deShannon singing “What the World Needs Now is Love”) -- and I hope you watched it, because it was perfect – Jake started singing on the spot. And there’s something about that little voice, probably because he belongs to me or I belong to him or something, but also because all these issues also have to do with our children. And hearing *his* voice sing out about the world needing love, I’ve got to be honest, if we heard voices like that in the world, love might have a chance.

In Psalm 82, God thunders out to all of the earthly gods: How long will you judge dishonestly? How long will you be partial to the wicked? If you read scholarship, which I’ve read much of, there’s much debate about who God is charging here. But I gravitate toward the understanding that the so-called gods that are being referenced here are the gods of our own creation, those things in our world, those institutions, those people, those powers that we invest with our own allegiance.

But no matter who God is addressing, there is something absolutely clear in the next verse about what it means for us. Stand up for the poor. Stand up for the orphan. Advocate for the rights of those who are afflicted and those who are in need. Deliver the poor and needy. Rescue them from their evil oppressors. In the Bible there is a clear charge for us to do something. I sometimes worry, by the way, about that word “evil” because it charge us into an us and them, but more about that later.

In my heart of hearts, the recent rulings of the Supreme Court of the United States, and all the other happenings in the world, are all about winners and losers. And each of the controversial decisions of the Court, the one to strip women of their right to control their body that presumes legislators somehow are more qualified to make incredibly difficult and complex decisions about individual lives than the people are in consultation with doctors and loved ones and humble prayers. Or the one to strip the EPA of its ability to protect Creation, that presumes our rapacious need for energy somehow is more important than our responsibility to the environment, our nation, or quite frankly, our children, who will inherit this planet. And yes, even the one about prayer that tempts churchgoers like us to say, oh good. But at the root of it, it’s also about power, who has it and who doesn’t, who gets to decide what gets prayed and to whom.

If we go to Psalm 82, what we do know is that all of these decisions disproportionately affect the poor, the already marginalized, those with less power and less control. Rather than standing up for the poor, these decisions tread on them. For reproductive health care that requires interstate travel is not accessible for all, and does place a higher burden on some than others. We already know that the anthropogenic climate change affects the poorest people and the poorest nations, some of whom, by the way, are already literally disappearing underwater. And we know that those with the least power may not be able to risk standing up to those who control part of their path and then invite them to participate in something they don’t believe in, even as beautiful as prayer. Prayer is a gift and it needs to come to us voluntarily. Pundits, op-eds and late night news outlets declare winners and losers after each one. Winners and losers in these well-funded decades-long legal donnybrooks. And what does love have to do with that? Everything. For love, you see, stands by those in need or pain with quiet compassion.

I John 3:17 puts it in the negative this way: If a person possesses the kinds of things we need to make it in the world, but refuses to share those things with those in need, is it even possible that God's love is in that person? If you have the power of autonomy but refuse to share it with someone, if you have means but use those means in ways to harm rather than enrich, and if you are thinking about that prayer ruling don't forget I Corinthians 13: love never insists on its own way. And more than that, though, love, real love, I think, is defined by the fact that it seeks the best for others. Because how can you truly love and not want the best for others?

Love doesn't just seek to provide equality. Love seeks to support and care, doesn't it? Love seeks to scoop somebody you love up in your arms and hold them until all is well. Love, by definition, does not leave room for winners and losers. Because instead, love declares the object of your love to be valuable, worthy, worth going to the ends of the earth for, which is exactly what I see in the incarnation of Jesus himself. God coming to us in love. Love coming to find. Love coming to lift. Love coming to heal. And as Jesus prayed, in his final prayer in John's gospel, for unity: God, may they all be one, just as you the Father and I and the Spirit are one. For that is what love does, it brings together.

So instead of thinking about what love does, maybe we should think about how we get to love. For love, I believe, requires a relationality mindset that fundamentally acknowledges the other, not as we want or wish them to be, but as they are. When Jesus healed in the Bible, no matter what gospel you look at, those moments are almost always preceded by a simple statement. Do you know what it is? Before Jesus healed, before he fed, before he raised from the dead, he was moved with compassion. Moved, in other words, by connection. Moved by being able to get a glimpse, even if only momentarily, and even if only partially, the true space of that person. And then Jesus did what Psalm 82 says we all need to do: advocate, deliver, even rescue. Loving is not just an act we do to earn points, not just another metric to measure up to or fall short of in the views of God. Instead, it is fundamentally a way of seeing another being, a way of approaching life and decision. Not to win, but together as one.

In my mind, the word love is analogous, or a beautiful dance partner at least, to how Desmond Tutu describes the African term *ubuntu*. That term means that my humanity, that my dignity, is fundamentally tied to yours, that unless you are full and free and abundant, I can't be either. Unless you are fed and alive, I can't be either. I can't be fully human without your humanity being fully honored. We can't be fully the Body of Christ without the whole world.

Contemporary author Julian Barnes puts it another way. He says that love, no matter how deep and no matter how strong, cannot make the object of our love happy. It can't. But what love does is create a shelter, a structure, a freedom, in which that person can grow into the fullness of who they are, not who I want them to be. And especially never at the cost of another. It is a balance to that plumb line of being so concerned about what is perfectly right living. Love acknowledges that it is an unfolding process. So we start with the premise that love is so important because it forbids the distinctions that divide, and instead starts from a place of connection.

Which brings us from the judges in Psalm 82 to the lawyer in Luke. My guide and companion these days when I read parables is Robert Capon. And while there seems to be no parable in our reading today, it is the parable that follows the two great commandments, to love God and to

love neighbor, that Jesus uses to explain not just who is my neighbor, as that lawyer asked, but what does love itself mean? This lawyer in Luke so often gets a bad rap. Lawyers always get bad raps. Trying to trap Jesus, commentaries and translations say. Trying to justify himself, the text says. But here's the thing. Lawyers rarely ask questions they don't know the answer to. So when this lawyer asked Jesus the first question, he already knew the answer. But what's remarkable about this lawyer, to my mind, is his second question. He had no idea – who is my neighbor? Wait a minute. How does this work? What do I do? And so there comes the parable that Capon says is completely wrongly named.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan. You know that story, right? The story of the man that is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, the one who is waylaid and beaten, the one for whom both priest and Levite come and don't even approach, don't even connect, clearly don't love because they walk on the other side. And then that Samaritan comes and takes care of him, and puts him on his donkey, and spends money and time. All of that, right? Jesus starts the parable the way Capon would name it. It's a Parable of a Certain Man. Or maybe the Parable of the One Who Fell into the Hands of Robbers and Thieves, Capon says. For the question of the parable is actually how others respond to him.

And by the way, Capon thinks that that man is Jesus himself. The question is how do we respond to Jesus? Jesus, Capon sees, and so do I, quite frankly, as the one who refuses the temptation to play the winner/loser game at all. Remember in his temptation in the wilderness he said, Get out of here, Devil, I want nothing to do with you. Remember when he was called in front of Herod he said, You say that I'm a king. Remember Jesus also taught that how you treat the least of these is how you treat me, literally. So maybe Capon is on to something.

That precursor for the Good Samaritan to act in love was noticing and then coming over to connect. The first ingredient of love, check. And then by furthering that love by doing everything for the sake of the other, even one whom he did not know, not seeking to win, but being willing to lose for the sake of the other. Because, do you know what happened on that road? On that road, on that turn? Do you know what people would do? I know you couldn't possibly imagine this... One person from the bandits would often volunteer to get beat up a little bit and lay by the side of the road as if they were hurt. All so that when that sucker came by, well, that's when the rest of them would pounce on him and steal what he had. So make no mistake about it, approaching this man was an act of risk in and of itself.

The Good Samaritan wasn't seeking to win, but being willing to lose for the sake of the other. By the way, does that sound like Jesus too? The Samaritan lost time and money, and whatever he was up to on that day, because we all have things to do, right? He risked his own well-being. He walked instead of rode. And he followed a way of love that not only saved the humanity of the one at the side of the road, but I bet saved his too. What's love got to do with all of this? Everything!

Friends, in these times, people with gifts to stand up for rights, to protest, to make trouble, to write leaders, to – like Psalm 82 says – advocate, deliver, rescue and even oppose the oppressors, they are needed. And I hope that you will use the gifts that you have well. But also, what I think the world needs now is those who have the gift for love. And that's what we do here. For

showing love. For fostering it through connecting, through relationship building, through singing about it. They, too, are needed, for in the end love isn't what Jesus *taught*, but how he lived. Not only refusing to make the distinction of winning and losing, but willing to give everything away for those in need, those struggling, until the oppressors did what they do, they tried to put an end to Jesus, didn't they? Well, that not only made Jesus a winner, but made all of us winners, too.

Friends, as you hear these instructions on being the Good Samaritan, as you hear this imperative to love, know this: We are called to love not to earn anything. We are called to love not because we chose Christ, but because Christ chose us. Not because of our goodness, but because of God's grace. Not because we justify ourselves by demonstrating what we know and claim his teachings, but rather that his teachings finally claim our hearts. Not to save anything, not to measure up, but instead to enter into, to become a very part of the power of love. For love is what in the end saves everything. Save one, you save the world. Love one, you love the whole world. Together, united, compassionate, until all are one. To be love until God's kin-dom draws near.

I needed to hear Jake's song at the beginning. Can I ask to hear yours now? Will you sing with me about what the world needs?

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.*

I want to end my sermon the way Jesus finished his conversation with that lawyer. You just sang about love. Now go and do likewise. And you will find eternal life, both now and forever. Amen.