

Over the last several weeks, I've heard from some of you that the actions of ICE make it easy to see who is our neighbor. Those folks held in unconscionable conditions without cause, that's our neighbor, right? Well, yes. And in spite of how easy it may be for some of us to see that we're doing the wrong thing to people who bear the image of God, not everyone can or is willing to see their humanity. Those mostly brown-skinned people have gotten the bulk of my attention as a preacher because they're facing absolutely unimaginable horrors at the hands of those in authority. But there's another side to all this that's much harder and much more uncomfortable. I heard a line the other day that goes like so: when we ask which neighbors Jesus wants us to love, it's the ones we're most worried he'll say. If you support the actions of ICE, then one of the neighbors you've gotta work to love is the person you want in a cage. But the same is true in reverse. If you support those in cages, the neighbors you've gotta work to love are the ones putting them in there.

It's the hardest part about being Christian. We don't get to hate evildoers, just the evil that they do. For folks like me, there's nothing about those masked, armed, indiscriminate persecutors that's lovable. At least nothing that's easy to see. And that's a problem. Because according to our story, they're still humans created by God. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, they can do that can take that away. No matter what they do, they remain human and will always bear a sliver of the image of God. That doesn't mean everything they do is exemplary. It doesn't mean I'm endorsing their actions. It doesn't mean they get a free pass to do terrible things. But it does mean they are people. No matter how much they hide their own humanity, no matter how much they hunt the vulnerable, no matter how much they seek the destruction of the poorest of the poor, they remain human.

Which stinks. That's a theological term, by the way. Theologically speaking, it stinks that we have to love everybody, including our enemies. And for what it's worth, Jesus never said "don't have enemies," he said, "love your enemies." Which is a wild thing to ask, and it raises questions. Just as we dealt with last week with the whole "who is my neighbor" thing, we can ask "who is my enemy?" The truth of it is, they aren't actually all that different as categories. "My neighbor" is pretty much any person, near, far, brown skinned, foreign born, and so on. But "my enemy" is just a subset of my neighbors. Put differently, everyone's our neighbor, everyone gets our love, some deserve it more than others, and some we have to work harder to love, but everyone, yes everyone's our neighbor.

Throughout our existence, detractors've said that that's Christianity's greatest weakness. We're naive and easily taken advantage of because of this generosity of spirit and the depth of belief in Christ's forgiveness. Maybe so, but that ignores the reality of what love is. Love is patient, love is kind, and so on. But love is also ferociously just and swears to defend the most vulnerable. Love is not an escape from consequences. Love calls out the damage you're doing to your own soul, names the evils you do to your neighbors, rejects the dominating twin swords of fear and nationalistic pride. Love demands you act right and work to fix where you haven't. Love makes deep claims that go well beyond what Hallmark'd sell ya. It's okay to have enemies as long as you never lose sight of what they could become with enough love. It sounds impossible that an ICE agent, say, could ever change their ways, and yet that's kinda the basis of our faith. No person, no matter what they've done, can escape the incalculable love of God. They also shouldn't be allowed to escape consequences for what they've done, but again, that doesn't remove their humanity. But we can love every single person *and* hold them accountable to the evils they commit. That's just plain scripture.

Amos says everyone will suffer if the leaders keep trampling on the needy and bringing ruin to the poor. Love the leaders enough to make them stop. Love the people enough to save them from the evils the leaders

commit. And do all of this with love and justice as your guide. Psalm 52 names the many evils of a tyrant. That tyrant does and says horrific things. It's okay, necessary even, to name those terrible things, hold the tyrant to account, and even take joy in the cessation of suffering that came at his hand. But it's not okay to remove his humanity. And that's what love is. In spite of all the horror enacted on other humans, recognizing that even the tyrant is still human is exactly the kind of Christ-like love that makes us so weird and so open. Paul argues that, as long as they actually change their ways, anyone can be made whole in Christ. But that caveat's super important, so long as they actually change their ways. Their wholeness is dependent on repairing the evils they bring into the world. Their humanity is not.

So how do we love our neighbor when they're the last person we wanted to hear Jesus say is our neighbor? On a very small scale, loving your neighbor is like telling someone they've got spinach stuck in their teeth. It's kind of uncomfortable, and you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings; but also, they need to know, and you'd actually be doing them a greater disservice by not saying anything. That's where we are right now. Christianity and America both've got a lot of spinach stuck in our teeth. I'm not saying those of us that are pointing out all that spinach have perfect dental records, but we do have eyes to see and ears to hear and the Holy Spirit's screaming about injustice while too many are too invested in decorum to say anything about it. It's Christian to love your neighbor, no matter who they are. It's Christian to love your enemy, no matter who they are. It's also Christian to name evil out loud. As if there was any doubt, putting humans in actual flooded cages is not loving our neighbor. Calling out ICE and the people pulling their strings is loving our neighbor, several categories at once, actually. Calling for an end to the systematic persecution they participate in is Christian. But remembering that they are human is, too.

We respect the dignity of every human being, says our Baptismal Covenant. But that same Covenant also says we seek justice and proclaim the Good News of Christ, which includes holding a special place of favor for the poor and the oppressed. It also includes holding the potential for forgiveness open for anyone who's ready to embrace what repentance entails. And repentance entails what we call "amendment of life." That means change. It's not wrong to help people see what they've done wrong and what needs to change. It's necessary. I suppose this is all a longwinded way of reiterating a simple sentence that's anything but simple to do: love your neighbor.

One last thing, and we'll call it a morning. How we love our neighbors and our enemies matters, of course it does. But also, scripture repeatedly points to the poor, the foreign, widows, orphans, lepers, and all those society says don't have the same rights as everyone else, scripture repeatedly points to them and says "that's where you'll find God" AND "they are your priority." Scripture also repeatedly points to tyrants and kings, the wealthy, the violent, the manipulative, and the evil-doers and says "stop them." That may sound abrupt, but it's yet another way to love. The kind of evils we're facing not only harm their targets but also harm their perpetrators. Their hearts are hardened with every atrocity, minds steeled against empathy, hands capable of ever-greater destruction with every despicable deed. And that evil eats at them. Even the people who take joy in their terrible work, the sins they commit eat away at them and they suffer greatly. I know, bless their hearts. But really, the deep compassion Jesus calls us to embody isn't just to save the oppressed from the evildoers. It's also to save the evildoers from themselves. And that's hard to even want to do. But it's part of being Christian. Don't lose sight of either. Love the oppressed and the oppressor. Save the oppressed and the oppressor. Compassion doesn't end with the ones who obviously need it. It continues to every soul, even, maybe especially to the ones we least want to extend it to. That's what we're called to, and it is the better part.