
Love Who's in Front of You

Date : 25-10-2020

Emily Carter YDS '23

Episcopal Church at Yale

October 25, 2020

Love Who's in Front of You

REFLECTION:

As we enter our shared worship this evening, I invite you to think about how you can make God's love real to the people around you. As Christians, we are called not to worry about holding the right views, but to show God's love to the individuals in our lives. I suspect I'm not alone in expecting some turmoil this election season. How might God be asking us to show love in the middle of fear and division?

SERMON:

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

My best friend from my hometown is quite a character. Dustin and I test opposite each other on every dimension of the Myers-Briggs Personality test. Sometimes he'll send me a text asking me if I want to go hiking, and I'll say yes expecting to set a time within the next week. He'll respond "Great, cuz I'm outside your house right now with two people you don't know who will be joining us." Two summers ago, when I had just graduated from college and he had just completed four years of service in the Army, I hopped on a plane to Florida with him. We met Faith, his closest friend from the Army, and began a nine-day drive back to our hometown in Washington State, where she'd be relocating to live with him. We took our time driving across the country, stopping at numerous landmarks along the way. Being the age we are, every stop entailed a photo-taking session that lasted way longer than it should have. I can understand wanting individual photos, photos of the group, photos of Dustin and me, and photos of Dustin and Faith, but we probably didn't need all of these at every location. As I'm trying to rush things along, Dustin absolutely would not let us walk away until we exhausted every combination, and I took a photo with Faith even though I didn't really know her. He demanded that Faith and I acknowledge what was already true – that we were relating with each other and that it mattered.

Although Dustin is a militant atheist and I'm sure he'll be horrified to learn I talked about him in a sermon, I think there's a lot of Jesus in his insistence that we see the people in front of us. In our Gospel today, Jesus lays out what matters most. Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. I often see people define "neighbor" in universal terms to defend against a tribal, exclusive understanding. I think Jesus had neither a universal nor a tribal understanding in mind, but rather one emphasizing the particular. Jesus ministered to the individuals around him. He brought people together in fellowship who otherwise wouldn't have taken notice of each other—tax collectors, fishermen, sinners—insisting that the relationships among them mattered. Jesus calls us to embody a love which is not defined by what it excludes, yet which is concrete, which responds in the here and now to the people we happen to find ourselves walking alongside.

Dustin has carried his insistence on connecting people into matters that aren't as funny as vacation photos. We met in middle school, when my homophobic self-loathing was causing me to lash out at gay and irreligious classmates. That made him a target of my hostility, but he saw through my insecurity and insisted on being my friend anyway. He went beyond developing a connection with me to asserting my belonging among others, in groups where I felt uncomfortable. He helped me grow into a healthier sense of self. With the upcoming election, I hope that we can bring the same love to the people around us that Jesus commanded of us and Dustin has modeled for me. I do enjoy getting on my high horse about how friendship across political difference has positive effects for individuals and for society. After all, Jesus affirms the value of both the Law and the Prophets. It is good to strive to rightly order our lives and society, and it is good to call out what isn't right in the world around us. Liberals and conservatives need

each other more than we like to admit. But the Christian hope doesn't lie in human politics. We are deeply sinful and no transformation of our political arrangements will reverse our nature to lead us into perfect harmony. Moses led his people toward a Promised Land he was permitted to see but not to cross into. Similarly, we are called to do good work without any guarantee that we'll see the conditions in the world around us improve. When God came to the world to show us what love looks like, he spent a ton of time feeding people who would be hungry again in a few hours, and healing people whose bodies have long since turned to dust. That work mattered.

My friendship with Dustin has survived more than ten years of our wildly differing personalities, beliefs, and life experiences because, more than just about anyone else I've met, he has persistently maintained a posture of openness toward the people around him. I am grateful for big decisions he's made in line with this attitude, like choosing to be my friend and extending grace to me over and over. But it's from the daily evidence of this posture that I take inspiration. In the coming political turbulence, we'll have to make a million small decisions about how to treat the people around us. We don't know what we're walking into. Things really can suddenly change suddenly for the worse – if we've learned anything since March, it's that. What I do know is that we will encounter people who are scared, people who are angry, people who make us angry. We'll have to choose how to treat them even as we struggle to pull together our own thoughts and feelings. I am reminded both by Jesus's statement on what matters most, and by my friend's photo-taking habits, that I need to ground myself in the individual relationships around me. Small decisions to show them God's love, and to receive it from them, are necessary and enough. The Democratic Party, the Republican Party, every government policy that has ever frightened or excited us, the United States itself — they'll all come to an end, one way or another. As Christians, we trust in something that won't. God loves us, and we are made to love God and love each other. No development in human politics can ever change that.