

Sharing Our Own Selves in Love

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica:

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

A lawyer who was also a Pharisee asked Jesus: *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*

Jesus answered him: *“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

Now listen to Paul’s words again: *“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”*

Jesus answered the Lawyer by quoting from the Torah—The Law of Moses. Being a Pharisee, Paul would have heard those words many times growing up. But after his conversion, those words took on a truly transformational meaning; “Loving your neighbor as yourself.”

I think there are two ways of loving your neighbor as yourself; that is, to love those you know and are close to such as family and friends; and then to love those you do not know and may even be at enmity with. These combine to make what Paul refers to as “community”—an all-encompassing love that transcends the boundaries of geography and culture.

It is what God in Jesus Christ came to teach us and what Paul, in his ministry, worked diligently to implement.

It has been 8 years and nearly 5 months since my ordination and Bishop Mary’s request that I serve as deacon here at St. Barnabas alongside your Rector, Rob Keim.

When Bishop Mary asked me if I had any reservation about coming to serve here, I only had one; I was sad to leave the people of St. Luke’s Atascadero.

I had been assigned to St. Luke’s to do what in seminary is called “field education” for 2 years. This meant that I had to leave St. Peter’s-by-the-Sea in Morro Bay. After 11+ years they had become my family and I loved them. They knew me and I felt very much loved by them.

My departure from St. Luke’s felt very much like my departure from St. Peter’s. We had grown in love.

Each congregation has geographical and cultural differences and yet **my** community has grown past those boundaries so that I have enveloped **all** in my love for them and they for me.

That might be a bit of a microcosm but the principle is that we can move beyond our niche of what we think is community to include so many more than we think.

When we first come to a new place—be it a new town, job, school, or church—we feel out of place and self-conscious. There is so much we don’t know.

We often subconsciously put up an invisible guard to protect ourselves from the unknown. We look for something familiar to help us navigate the unfamiliar.

Let love enter here.

I mean the kind of love Jesus and Paul talk about; letting that invisible guard down and seeing the new or unfamiliar as known and familiar.

Loving the unfamiliar is not something we come by naturally though it may be easier for some than others. But once we let down that protective guard and open ourselves we often find our openness can be reciprocated.

Apostle Paul was constantly moving into new places and meeting new people—purposefully putting himself in the unfamiliar. Being found in the unfamiliar, he looked for the familiar—his starting point.

He did not know the people in the synagogue in a new city, but he knew the basics of synagogue. He did not know all the customs of the city, but he found people with whom he had a common trade to help him. Paul opened himself to the unfamiliar so that he could become familiar.

As Paul revealed himself and his purpose, he found new friends—some of whom became companions. He was thus able to share the Gospel of Jesus with the townspeople.

This is not to say that everyone accepted his message—as he tells the Thessalonians:

“...though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi”.

Yet he always saw love as the way—no matter how he was treated—even in prison when the opportunity to escape came up, he stayed so that he could save the life of the jailer.

Paul embraced with no holds barred the message of love Jesus taught.

This is how the Kingdom of God works. Christ shared his own self not just with a few close friends—Jesus shared himself with the World.

So we also, as imitators of Christ, are to love so intimately that we share our own selves, indeed, with the world. In reading Paul’s letters he makes it sound easy but: It’s hard!

Each member of the church has a special gift to be used for the upbuilding of the Church—Paul reminds us of this many times in his letters.

Still we may feel discomfort and maybe even a sense of the unfamiliar in serving.

I remember the first time I was asked to serve on Altar Guild—I had no experience with altar stuff! I went home with this look 😬 in my heart after saying yes.

Remember that Paul was going from town to town, city to city. He was not going to a ready-made church. He was going in blind to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ and the new way of love to create new communities of love—bringing the Kingdom of God every closer.

So as uncomfortable as it may be to say yes to serving inside the familiarity of the Church, in following Christ into the way of love we must also use our gifts outside in the unfamiliar in the World.

We must work to love the world so much so that we share even our own selves with them.

Last month I shared with you the 5 areas of loving our neighbors as ourselves That our Social Justice Coordinating Team is working on.

We have now added another called: Peace. We look forward to the ways we can demonstrate our love through peace as this team develops tangible activities for us to participate in.

But one of the areas that is always of immediate need is homelessness. As Jesus said, *“You will always have the poor with you.”* 5CHC has asked if we would help fill the need for move-in kits for those who are transitioning into permanent housing. We hope to have full information on that in the next month.

In the meantime, I wonder, can we, the people of St. Barnabas, find it in our hearts to share our own selves in the love Christ and walk into a room of smelly, wet, unkempt people who are looking only for shelter from the cold and rain this winter? Can we work with the 5CHC winter warming center 2023-24 to make sure these children of God are cared for?

I will be speaking more on this at coffee hour.

Truly, there are so many ways we can follow in the loving footsteps of Christ our Lord and his Apostle Paul in loving our neighbor as ourselves— sharing our own selves—in bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God that crosses geography and culture; creating new communities founded and grounded in Love.