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Easter 5C
Peace, Seattle
May 2, 2010 epk
John 13:31-38

WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE?

Did you notice the bookends?

The setting is his final meal with them; the topic –*"agapao"* – agape love; unconditional love.

He's already washed their feet, and now, just after Judas leaves the room—Judas—comes the new teaching, only it's not new—it goes way back: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

In case we're wondering if Jesus isn't being a bit too naïve and idealistic here, St. John reminds us that Jesus' final lecture is delivered between the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter.[1]

Which is precisely why he washed their feet—all of them, Judas too.
As if to say, DO THIS, AND JUST MAYBE YOU'LL LEARN HOW TO LIVE INTO THE REST OF IT, WASH FEET AND MAYBE YOU'LL LEARN HOW TO LOVE EACH OTHER LIKE I LOVE YOU.
Bookends.

So, what does love look like? There's not one picture, but many.

- A waiting Father welcoming his wayward son home.
- A bleeding woman freed from her disease and given back her life, her family and her community.
- A man who puts his own life on hold to care for the needs of a perfect stranger—and not just any stranger, a lifelong enemy.
- A God-Man who gives up heaven for the cross.

Jesus gives us lots of illustrations of LOVE but they all flow from this:
YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND SOUL AND MIND AND STRENGTH, AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

On Wednesday I attended the spring Bishop's convocation.
Our speaker, Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, spoke on the topic:
LOVE AS POLITICAL AND ECOLOGICAL VOCATION. Different twist, huh?

She reminded us that in order for us to be about what we as church are called to do, to "participate in what God is doing in the world," we have to ask that same fundamental question that a man once put to Jesus: **WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?**

Who is my neighbor? Now that is a dangerous question! I think it's likely the guy who asked it immediately wanted to reach out and take it back because Jesus, instead of giving a precise, narrow, reasonable definition of "neighbor," Jesus deconstructed the man's whole worldview—and ours—by telling the story of the good Samaritan.

So we shouldn't ask the question WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR, unless we're prepared to have our minds and hearts expanded beyond our wildest imagination.

[1] I am indebted to Bishop Chris Boerger for this observation.

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Because the answer to the question, WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR, according to Jesus is: ANYONE AND EVERYONE WHOM MY LIFE TOUCHES OR EFFECTS.

And the remarkable thing about this teaching of Jesus is that the number of people who fit that definition has been growing and expanding century after century as our sense of connectedness has expanded, until, in our time and day, it includes people half a world away—people I will never meet in person—who are directly effected my choices, my lifestyle, the food I eat and clothes I wear, my carbon footprint, in this interdependent, global village.

Our calling as church, Dr. Moe-Lobeta said, is to give the work of God social form in every time and place. This is what NEIGHBOR-LOVE is about.

Christians of every time and place have grappled with what NEIGHBOR-LOVE LOOKS LIKE.
At times we've failed spectacularly. But at other times Christians have left a new high-water mark for what neighbor-love can be.

FIRST EXAMPLE: For centuries Europe suffered from periodic and devastating attacks of the bubonic plague—the Black Death. In the summer of 1527 a pastor from the city of Breslau asked Martin Luther his opinion on whether the proper Christian response to the plague was to flee or to stay.

Before he could answer, an outbreak of the plague struck Luther's own hometown, Wittenberg, on August 2, 1527.[2] On August 10 the mayor ordered Luther and the entire university community to leave town.

- Luther and his own pastor, John Bugenhagen, refused and stayed to minister to the sick and terrified together.
- Within less than two weeks, eighteen people were dead.
- Luther was there when the mayor's wife died and when University Chaplain George Rörer's pregnant wife lost her life.
- Katie, Luther wife, was also pregnant, yet she and Martin set up a hospital in their home.[3]

Later that fall, after the crisis abated, Luther finally was able to address the question in his treatise, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague" (November, 1527)

He told the pastor and people of Breslau that they had the responsibility and the competences - both theological and moral - to come to their own conclusions and that they should do so with as much agreement as possible.

Then he laid down the principle, purified in the crucible of his own experience, that pastors and others who had responsibilities to neighbors should stay with the dying, while those who were not needed to care for others, could and should leave.[4] That's what 16th century NEIGHBOR-LOVE looks like.

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[2] Gary Simpson, *Being Neighbor in the Coming Pandemic Crisis: Thinking with Luther in the 21st Century*. *Caring Connections,* Spring 2008 (vol.5, nr. 1) An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling. http://www.luthersem.edu/healthy_leaders/articles.aspx?m=1419#neighbor

[3] A letter from Martin to a colleague who was now at the University's place of exile, expressed the anguish of some moments during the plague:
"I am concerned about the delivery of my wife, so greatly has the example of the Deacon's wife frightened me. But He who is mighty has done great things for me. . . My little Johann cannot now send his greetings to you because of his illness, but he desires your prayers for him. Today is the twelfth day that he has eaten nothing; he has been somehow sustained only by liquids. It is wonderful to see how this infant wants to be happy and strong as usual, but he cannot because he is too weak."

[4] Christopher Baker in, *Suffering in Paradise: The Bubonic Plague in English Literature from More to Milton*, by Rebecca Totaro. *Discoveries* 22.2 (2005). 15 October 2005. http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/reinheimer/discoveries/archives/222/baker222pf.htm

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Of course Luther didn't always get it right. His bombastic personality and his own cultural prejudices at times got the best of him. His treatise against the Jewish people contributed to a mind set that centuries later would come to haunt the land of Luther.

And yet, out of the cauldron of the WW2, come some of the most powerful examples of love in social form. One of those stories originates in Southeastern France, in the area known as Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. [EXAMPLE TWO]

During the Second World War collaborators in Nazi occupied France delivered 83,000 Jewish people, including 10,000 children, to the Nazi death camps - only 3,000 ever returned.[5]

But in the area of Le Chambon ordinary people, often poverty-stricken themselves, quietly took in, protected, and saved as many Jews as their entire population, often at the peril of their own lives.

In June 1940, the very day after France capitulated to Germany, Pastor André Trocmé stood in the pulpit of his parish church to address his parishioners:

> "The responsibility of Christians," he told them, "is to resist the violence that will be brought to bear on their consciences, through the weapons of the spirit."

Trocmé served as a moral compass for the village. Defying the Nazi régime and French collaborationists, the villagers of Le Chambon provided a safe haven throughout the war for the Jews. Every home hid strangers, not for days, but for years. So deep was their call to neighbor-love that no resident of Le Chambon ever turned away, denounced, or betrayed a single Jewish refugee.

When Vichy authorities demanded that Pastor Trocmé cease his activities, this is what he told them:

> "These people came here for help and for shelter. I am their shepherd. A shepherd does not forsake his flock. I do not know what a Jew is. I know only human beings."

Eventually, Trocmé was forced to hide from the Nazis. But his wife continued his legacy and with the aid and encouragement of local residents many Jews resided in relative calm until the end of the war.[6]

Who is my neighbor? To whom am I bound in love?
Since the first century, as the story from ACTS teaches us, those who follow Christ have had to ask the question over and over, and each time the circle has grown.

We haven't always got it right. History is riddled with examples of the church's abysmal failures. **Ironically, history teaches us that the church can be the most closed off to workings of God!** But when we do get it right, there's something sacred witness that cannot be denied—that stands the test of time.

Christ calls us to practice neighbor-love in ways that stretch us and challenge us (as we say in our vision statement) "to discern God's presence and invitation into unfamiliar places, and to venture beyond ourselves, so all people will experience God's love."

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[5] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum USHMM COLLECTION (1990.238.1)
[6] As an old villager from Le Chambon later recalled: *"We didn't protect the Jews because we were moral or heroic people. We helped them because it was the human thing to do."* Ibid.

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What does being a neighbor look like today? For us?

How about making room and welcoming into our community people of all orientations?
How about setting aside a week of summer vacation for a mission trip to the Lummi Reservation?
How about providing space and support so that families without homes can get back on their feet?

We are called to love as Jesus loved in a world bounded by betrayal and denial.
It's an impossible task, of course; ridiculously impossible.

But it becomes possible when, by the grace of God, we look at one another through the eyes of Christ who taught us that our neighbor looks just like him.

Amen.