

What Love Requires Next

Rev. John Allen

There is a question hanging over our nation as we awake this morning.

What comes next?

With a soul-wearying election behind us, and a season of transition ahead of us, what comes next?

Obviously there are big questions, at the level of policy and program...

But I am talking about among us. As church. As a community in Milton. As a nation. Among us. Between us. What comes next?

I hear often from members of our congregation who feel the sting of alienation from family and friends. Who, throughout the last few years have perhaps even lost their capacity to remain in relationships that had once been so important.

And these fractures in our common life are not born of petty disputes. They do not arise when we engage disagreements about marginal tax rates or the mechanics of welfare programs. We have strong disagreements about things like this, sure. But they rarely cost us relationships.

No, these fractures in our common life are not born of petty disputes, they emerge from matters of our very souls. They arise when people feel that their basic goodness is being called into question. Or when people hear the validity of their love for their spouse denied. Or when people hear their own lived experiences of injustice belittled and explained away.

These are the wounds that are weighty enough to pull us apart.

In our scripture passage today, Jesus is asked how we as his followers should approach such separation. What we should do when someone's words or actions cause a deep rift between us.

And, fortunately for us, this is one of the rare moments where Jesus gives a very straightforward answer, with concrete steps.

First, Jesus says. Speak with them alone.

If you are not heard, then speak to them among a close circle of others.

And if that is not heard, then bring the matter before the community you share.

And if that still doesn't work, then let that person be to you as a gentile or a tax collector.

A few things I notice here.

First, this approach is engaged. In the face of the profound sense of separation borne of such weighty hurt, one temptation might be to regard the other as the enemy and seek to overpower them. This is usually the mode of politics. To overpower. To outmaneuver.

But this approach isn't about marshaling allies to your cause to overcome someone, it is about marshaling the courage to speak to them plainly and directly.

Second, this approach centers relationship. Jesus here encourages us to draw on our relationships with one another, and the strength of having a community around us. As the going gets tougher, the circle grows wider. We need one another's support to approach our deepest wounds with healing in our hearts.

And third, this approach is not without boundaries or limits. It does not insist that we subject ourselves to endless abuse. It does not assume all rifts can be healed. There is, in Jesus message, also a moment to walk away.

Although, its interesting the way he phrases that last part. "Let the person be to you as a gentile or a tax collector." That is to say, an other, an outsider.

And yet Jesus famously throughout his life turns to outsiders with love. Not always because he can condone their behavior, but because he can see even within them the image of God. And so even here, when the brokenness seems insurmountable, Jesus is insisting that the light of love, no matter how dim it may grow, never fully goes out.

Peter actually asks a follow up question. Do you mean I might have to forgive someone like seven times. Not seven says Jesus. Seventy-seven.

How might this look in your family, or in our community?

Who do you need to reach out to, one-on-one to speak honestly with hope of healing?

Who do you need to speak to in the presence of a few others? What circle can you invite around you in order to find the courage to approach a broken relationship with hope?

How can the church be a space to call us toward one another for conversation and connection, about the deep and important stuff, the things that may hurt.

Where have you reached your limit?

Rev. John Dorhauer, who is the leader of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, sent us all a message yesterday about our services today in the wake of this election. And he posed this question, which I pose to you.

What does love require of us next?

I think that this question might be an even simpler way to say what Jesus offers us in this approach to healing. To in each moment, but especially in moments of tension, conflict, and division, to ask: what does love require of us next?

What does love require of us next?

I believe that we can move into a more hopeful future, in every sphere of our lives.

I believe that we can move into a more hopeful future as a nation, as a whole people.

But not if we think our task is simply to overpower each other.

And not if we think that unity simply means finding the lowest common denominator.

Empty platitudes will not bring us together, appeals to vague notions of what we all value are not a sturdy enough foundation to build a shared life on.

We will find the healing we seek in this question?

What does love require of us next?

We will find the wholeness we seek in engaged relationships, not only when it is easy, but especially when it is hard.

And we will find the truth of who we are together not when we abandon the truths of our own hearts for the expedience of tranquility, but when we are willing to speak honestly about the hurt in our hearts, and know where our limits are, and know those moments when we need to love from a distance, with hope alive in our hearts.

In the letter I sent to our congregation before the election I wrote: “our leaders are not our saviors and political power will not bring about the kingdom of God. This is the work of Christ and his Church.”

We have a right to expect that our leaders will strive to meet our highest ideals. But we will be disappointed if we wait on any of them to heal the hurt at the heart of our nation. Because it is beyond the power of any individual to bring about such healing.

It is the work of the Spirit. And for us, it is the work of the church.

So I want to challenge you, if there is someone you have been thinking of during this sermon, to ask yourself. “What does love require of me next?”

I want to challenge all of us to ask that question as we engage our shared civic lives in the months ahead, “what does love require of me next.”

Remembering that such love is not weakness or surrender, but a powerful force of transformation.

And such love is not just our duty, but could be a source of great joy.

What does love require of you next?

What does love require of us next?

Imagine what the world would look out, if it was built out of all our answers to that question.