

“Love your Enemies through Grace”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 3/15/2020

Romans 5:1-2a, 6-8; Luke 10:30-37

The concept of the Hebrew word “Shalom” has far reaching implications. In short, we interpret the word to mean peace, as we do its fellow Semitic equivalents “Salaam” in Arabic or “Shalaam” in Aramaic—but the word “shalom,” the mother word—if you will, descends with a very specific context and set of actions. While it means peace, its connotation embodies much deeper sentiments; it also infers a sense of wholeness or completeness—this is why shalom is a very active blessing when being extended to others. It is the wishing of inward and outward peace on another. Peace to you or Shalom is a very meaningful blessing. However, another critical aspect of Shalom that harks from its ancient roots refers specifically to “safety.” Interestingly, in ancient times, we see “shalom” being enacted when someone becomes a guest of another person. The visitor becomes, in effect, an extension of the host’s family while with them. In other words, the guest enters into the ultimate protection of the host; any harm to the guest is as if harming the host themselves, so refuge or sanctuary is extended to the visitor—to the point that the host is willing to give their own life in defense of the guest. Now, that is indeed an important facet of Shalom that should not be quickly dismissed or forgotten. Peace implies safety with others. The question I pose for you today is a simple one: What if your guest doesn’t deserve your protection?

Mumu, my daughter, and I watched an animated film together yesterday called “Spies in Disguise.” The synopsis of the movie included super spy Lance Sterling being setup by his new nemesis the evil cyber-kinetic terrorist Killian to take the fall for an internal theft, which he didn’t do, and so egotistical Sterling must clear his name while being chased by his former employers at the spy agency. To complicate things further, he depends on nerdy young scientist Walter who invents gadgets and technology to help Sterling in the field, but his inventions are centered around the idea of not trying to harm anyone, just capture them—and this much to Sterling’s disappointment. While Sterling angrily wants grenades and things that blow up his enemies, Walter simply wants to create things that don’t necessarily hurt the bad guys but helps in apprehending them, like his famous glitter bomb, which disarms the bad guys with cuteness. So, you can see from the outset these two characters are at odds with one another. Sterling sees the world of diametrically opposed forces desperately seeking ultimate control at whatever costs, as does his nemesis Killian, by the way—while Walter by his own admission is a “hugger, not a fighter.” He sees a better way. Just a moment ago, I posed “what if your guest doesn’t deserve your protection?” because in the final fight scene of the movie, Walter is propelled high into the sky as he hangs tightly on to Killian, the bad guy—in hopes of simultaneously disabling Killian’s killer drones who are set to destroy thousands of people, in the course of doing so Killian says something interesting to Walter. He says, “you won’t disable the drones because if you do, you will end up killing us too, and your character will not allow you to kill anyone, not even me.” Walter responds with a smile, “you’re right.” Then he attaches his last life-saving gadget onto Killian’s body (the inflatable hug) and disables the drones, knowing Killian would now be saved and his own life lost. This was a children’s movie, and here you have a young man giving up his life for someone who by most moral codes doesn’t deserve to be saved. Wow, what a dilemma, an act of absolute selflessness—giving up his actual life to save not only the thousands in danger but the mad man himself Killian. So then this forced me to ask myself the same question: “What if the person in front of me falling doesn’t deserve my protection?” What should I do?

The former minister of our church, David Edwards, and I talked a bit when I first arrived here about the heroism of conscientious objector and WWII Army medic Desmond Doss from Lynchburg, and how he ran head first into the bloodiest battle of the war in the Pacific with no weapon but a devout faith based on extreme love for all. After the Army was forced to retreat down a cliff away from the enemy, Desmond stayed on the ridge, through the night, evading the enemy while rescuing soldier after soldier—by the end he had rescued at least 75 wounded soldiers and some of them were enemy soldiers. Can you imagine that? His act of selflessness on the battlefield where two diametrically opposing forces are actively and brutally at work in the name of self-preservation, who deserves your shalom? I have reasoned that you can answer in one of two ways. You can answer it simply as **everyone** or just as easily make the case—**no one**. Either way, the answer is clear. We must extend our shalom to all. Why? Grace.

It is the core of our faith that compels, and it reaches much further back than even Jesus of Nazareth. We are created to love all, even those who hate us. However, Jesus illuminated this truth. He told a story in which a man was robbed and beaten, and left for dead. The religious leaders passed him on the road but ignored him. They shared the same religion, the same language, the same culture, the same history, but still they ignored him even though he was at death's door, bleeding out on the road—we can presume his wife and children would never see him again, and these supposedly spiritual leaders could not find it in themselves to “love” their own. Then, a man who was a different race, spoke a different language, different culture, and yes, even, a different religion saw the man and immediately had compassion for him. And even though his own race was considered lower and unworthy even to touch such a man (some would even call them their enemy overlords), he risked it all and did it anyway. He picked the man up and carried him to a place to be healed. This man's blood covered his clothes and his belongings. In essence, they became as one—brothers (human helping human). And though he had to leave him there after a while, he took from his own limited money and paid in advance to have the man taken care of by the people there, as if he was his own family. He extended shalom through grace. He gave him the “inflatable hug.”

Jesus said, “you have always heard it said Love your Neighbor, but I tell you to love your enemy as well.” This is the hard part... I tell you this, for some of us, our greatest source of pain is ourselves. We must start by loving ourselves. For others of us, it may be someone very close to us—even a family member—who has been the source of the greatest pain in our lives. I say this, do not be afraid of what grace can do even there... let it work on their lives. Give them that “inflatable hug.” God has your back. Love those who absolutely do not deserve it, and obviously not because they deserve it, but because God who extended grace to you, extends it to all. You cannot be the gatekeeper of God's grace. God's grace is transformative, and when people encounter the selfless love that we're talking about they will be transformed too. They will find a way to finally love themselves again, and then others. So, like Desmond Doss, don't stop with just your fellow soldiers who are wounded on the battlefield, as deserving as they are, but pick up the enemies too—they are perhaps even more wounded and in need. I am not advocating maintaining toxic, unhealthy relationships. Sometimes, you have to leave them in the care of others who can attend to their needs (you aren't the expert at everyTHING), but you pulled them out of the ditch and carried them to the healing place—you were the bridge to living hope. Be the life-line. Be the “inflatable hug.” Be grace embodied on this earth. Love your enemies because it's God's way.

Shalom to you all