



What Love Looks Like

TEXT
Luke 10:25–42

February 18, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

It doesn't take long to discover that at Village, we like to tell stories. Maybe you've noticed this. Now, most of what I've learned about good storytelling, I've learned from Tom Are. The man is a master storyteller. He is the one of the best I know. His stories are so relatable and so captivating, we could listen to them over and over ... and we have!

In the interest of fairness, however, and because I will surely pay for that comment later today, I will share this too: Tom likes to say that any story he can tell in five minutes, I can tell it in 10. (Let that sink in for a minute; it's not a compliment, but it is accurate.)

We all bring our own quirks and styles and habits to the telling, but story, as a form of communication, is as old as humanity itself. We use stories to illuminate, to entertain, to teach, to learn, to emphasize and to inspire. We understand stories — except when we don't. And some of Jesus' stories are among the most difficult to unravel.

Someone asks about the kingdom of God, and Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story about gardening."

Someone asks about prayer, and Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story about a determined widow."

Someone asks about their inheritance, and Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story about unfair labor practices."

Someone asks about heaven, and Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story — now this is a good one — let me tell you a story about ten bridesmaids and some oil lamps."¹

It can be a little confusing. But it's worth noticing that when Jesus is confronted with big and important questions, including today's "Who is my neighbor?" he doesn't start reciting doctrine. He doesn't reach for the Book of Confessions. He says, once again, "Let me tell you a story."

Do you remember the first story I ever told you? Me neither. There have been a lot over the years. But I looked it up.

This is the story, and this is the way I told it nearly six years ago, word for word:

My niece Lily is seven years old. She and her brother and sister and parents still live just a mile down the road from the neighborhood I grew up in, where my parents still live, so I get to see Lily any time I

make it back to Michigan. She has red hair, just like mine, and nine times out of ten, people mistake her for my daughter. She looks like me, but she has way more energy than me.

A little over a year ago, I was staying with my parents, and Lily invited herself for a sleepover. This sounded like fun. It was fun — until I remembered how little sleep is actually accomplished at a sleepover. Somewhere between the hours of two and four in the morning, Lily bounced on me.

"Tell me a story," she begged. Like any good child-care provider, I pretended I was still asleep. She bounced again. "Tell me a story," she laughed. I started to tell a story about a princess. "I don't want that kind of story," she said.

I tried a story about a talking elephant. "I don't want that kind of story, either." I attempted a story about a very tired grown-up. That's when gave me the look; it's the look that says, "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

"You can do better than that," she said. I gave up.

"Lily, for heaven's sake, what kind of story do you want?"

"That's easy, Aunt Jenny," she said. "I want a story about

us. *That way I'll remember it always.*"

So, Village, if you'll indulge me today, I'd like to tell you a story about us. It begins, of course, with the gospel. And you know how it goes. You just heard it.

A man asks Jesus, "How do I inherit eternal life?"

Jesus says, "What have you been taught before?"

The man recites Holy Scripture perfectly, and Jesus says, "Exactly. Do this, and you will live."

Now that's all fine and good, but there's more. The man presses with a second question. "So, who is my neighbor? You know, technically speaking?" And Jesus tells a story — the story of the Good Samaritan, in which a man is beaten up by robbers and left for dead on the side of the road.

A priest walks by and, seeing him, crosses to the other side of the street, keeping his distance, so as not to become ritually unclean. After all, there is worship to lead, so he carries on, business as usual — though I imagine he offered thoughts and prayers as he walked.

Not long after, a Levite walks by, and the same thing happens: distance to keep ... obligations to meet ... thoughts and prayers, surely. And you know what happens next: a Samaritan walks by, a Samaritan of all people, and noticing the man in need, he comes close and sees how bad things really are. He holds his body, and he cleans his wounds, and he takes him to an inn. He cares for him

overnight, and arranges for care to continue when he has to go back on his way.

The story over, Jesus looks at the man and says, "Well, which one was the neighbor?"

The man answers correctly again: "The one who showed mercy."

"Exactly," Jesus says. "So go and do likewise."

Love, we might then observe, isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Love is active. It takes risks and rewrites its daily routine at a moment's notice. Love gives of itself and never asks anything in return. Love bridges every gap and breaks down every barrier. Love is something we go and do.

All of this is true. But here's the thing about the gospel. Just when you think you've got it all figured out, it keeps going. This is a good thing. It means the gospel is ever and always pushing us, challenging us, shaping us into something better than we have been before, refusing to let us be complacent. It is one of the things I love most about the Bible.

For right after the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us love is going and doing, Mary and Martha come along in the very next verse. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home. And while he's there, her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him. The problem is that Martha is left with all the work of hospitality, while her sister reaps the benefits of her effort. She approaches Jesus and says as much: "Don't you care that

I am having to do all the work myself? Tell her to help me!"

And Jesus looks at her and says, "Martha, you are worried and distracted and upset about so much — and only one thing matters. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

So love, we might then puzzle, is peaceful and still. Love values being present over being productive. It is quiet and contemplative, making space for reflection and learning. Love allows itself to receive. Love is sitting and listening.

All of this is true. But you see the problem, right? These stories, pressed right up against one another, are a bit contradictory. Which is it, Jesus? What does love look like? Is it going and doing, or is it sitting and listening?

A clear-cut answer would be really good right now, because we live in a world that seems to be unraveling at the seams, more and more every day, and discerning how to be people of love in a culture filled with hate is no small task. We need all the help and guidance we can get.

The answer, of course — you know this — is both. Love isn't one thing or the other thing. Love is everything. Because for better or worse, love, God-shaped, gospel-driven love is far too big for any human limitations, categorizations or explanations.

A number of years ago now, when I was back in my first year of ministry, I was having trouble writing a sermon. I had

studied the text. I had read all the commentaries and all the essays. I even had an outline, but something was missing. So there I was, staring at my bookshelf, praying for some sort of divine intervention, when I heard a voice behind me. It was not the voice of God. It was Larry, our senior pastor. He was on his way out of the building. He poked his head inside the doorway, and he said, "Jenny, you aren't going to find any more answers on that shelf."

He was right. And I have remembered his comment often ever since. Because when it comes to love, I have a lot of books I can read through. I can reference Bible verses and recite stories. I can parse out the word in all sorts of ancient languages, and I can paint it on a banner that stretches all the way from the ceiling to the floor. But when it comes to knowing what the love of Jesus Christ looks like — today, here and now, in everyday life, at work, in relationships, at home, at school — in this, Village, you have been my greatest teacher.

You have shown me, over and over, what love looks like.

Love looks like Fred Farkas, who almost always beat me here on Sunday mornings, no matter what time I arrived. "Morning, Reverend," he would say, with his hands full of bulletins. I asked him once if he slept here on Saturday nights. "I don't sleep here," he said, "but I sure do like being here."

Love looks like Ruthie Kline, surrounded by 250 poinsettias and about a bajillion Easter lilies and a delivery address ready for each of them.

Love looks like Bob Bliss, who shows up at the Gathering early enough every week to secure his spot — front row, first seat, stage left — because his daughter Becky and his son-in-law Nathan lead worship, and he is a proud papa, and he wants an unobstructed view.

Love looks like Mardel Lillard, a stalwart of Mission Sewing, whose quilt now hangs on the workroom wall. Mardel came to sew every Tuesday, but mid-morning she'd take a break to walk into every single office around here, just to check in and say hello, always wearing her Village name tag because Tom Are once said it was a hospitable thing to do in a church this big.

Love looks like the Front Porch Alliance and Hillcrest Transitional Housing and Mainstream Coalition and Habitat for Humanity — organizations you support, organizations that love our community so much, they insist on continually striving to make it better.

Love looks like the small stone squirrel set out to keep watch over Julie Lee's marker in the memorial garden as long as I've been here.

Love looks like a service in that same garden, with many small children present to commend their grandmother to God. And just as I was saying the opening prayer, the

youngest broke free from her mother's grip and plopped herself down in the hole intended for her grandmother's ashes. I picked her up and finished the service with her in my arms. Afterwards, her older brother approached me with a tear-stained face. He was in fifth grade, and he loved his grandmother deeply.

"I know my sister wasn't supposed to play in the hole," he said, "but I'm really glad Grandma didn't have to go in there by herself." Love looks like that, doesn't it?

Love also looks like every one of you that ever kept vigil at a loved one's bedside, ever-present until the treatments worked, or until there was no treatment left to try.

Love looks like little Vera Thomas, who twirls and dances at the Gathering, convinced — and correct — that God delights in her joy.

Love looks like Village on Antioch; like the courage it takes to ask for help, the imagination it takes to dream up something new together, and the endurance it takes to keep going, even when it's hard.

Love looks like Lexa Carr, who was on the search committee who called me here, who was the very first person from Village I ever spoke to. I was sitting in her living room, trying to find the words to explain that I was leaving.

"Tell me about this new place," she said quietly. And I told her about its history and its location. I told her what intrigued me about the job description,

what I was excited about and what I was nervous about.

Finally she interrupted me. “You haven’t said anything about the people,” she said. “Will you be able to love them, and will they love you?” Staring at my hands, I told her yes. And I told her I hadn’t wanted to tell her about the people, because to tell her about new people felt like a betrayal.

Lexa paused, and then she said, “Jenny, there’s always room for more love. That’s just how it works.”

And just this weekend, love looked like one of you dropping off peanut butter cookies at my house. “I am so mad at you,” you said, “but here. You’ll need energy to pack,”

With that, you reminded me that love is always bigger than our own feelings and emotions.

Even in these last days, you have still been my greatest teachers. And here’s the thing. I could keep going. I could talk about the love I have seen in you for days on end. But if I don’t wrap it up soon, we won’t make it to the table; and the table, the Lord’s table, that’s what love looks like, too.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It first comes to us as a commandment, but I have come to believe that it is also a promise — that the day really is coming when we will all live like that and love like that. And I believe this because of you.

Back when my niece Lily invited herself for a sleepover, I didn’t get much sleep. The truth is, I didn’t get much sleep last night, either. Sometimes love keeps us awake. Because, thanks be to God, love refuses to leave us alone. It changes us. It shapes us. It leads us in new directions, and it never stops teaching us.

But Village, know this: When I consider everything I have learned about love, you are my very best story. And thanks to Lily, I know what happens with the best stories. You remember them. You remember them always.

¹All text that appears in italics is text taken from my first sermon at Village (“Free To Be Me: Who Is My Neighbor?” preached October 7, 2012). The text that day was the same: the parable of the Good Samaritan. That Sunday, it was assigned to me as part of a sermon series. It seemed to be something holy to use the same text for my last sermon.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.