

Sermon: Tell Me About This Love
Text: John 21:1-19
Date: May 5, 2019
Context: WWPC
Third Sunday after Easter
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

John 21:17

This past Wednesday an email appeared in my inbox of the kind that I have come to dread. It was sent in response to an event that now occurs regularly in America.

It was from my good friend and colleague on campus, Brian Ammons, the chaplain at WWC. It read as follows:

Friends,

We stand in solidarity and grief with our colleagues and neighbors at UNC Charlotte.

We pray for the two students who lost their lives in the shooting, and for the others seriously injured. We pray for their family and friends, their school community, and the people who have supported them on their journey.

We pray for all of those impacted by gun violence, and for those who this morning are grieving previous losses as they read the news.

Just three days after the shooting in Chabad at Poway, we pray for an end to mass shootings and all gun violence — for a day when e-mails like this won't ever be written.

We pray for the perpetrators of violence, as we seek not to see them as monsters, but rather to do the hard work of remembering that they, too, are beloved children of God. We wrestle to hold in tension individual accountability and systemic failures — and we remember, too, the people that love them.

We will keep a candle lit across from Gladfelter, once again today. As we pass by, may we also remember all the candles we've lit over the years, and all the lives lost to violence.

As our year comes to a close, we hold our fellow students, staff, and faculty down the road at UNCC in the light. While they go through their end of school — exams, move out, commencement, and now with the addition of vigils and memorials — may they feel the love and support of the larger community.

*Peace,
Brian*

Sadly, Brian's email came just two days after another public shooting, this one at the Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California. So I sat pondering the content of Brian's email for a few minutes, then sent him the following reply:

Brian--I thought your email to the campus was perfect.

We certainly did not know when we started in this work that college campuses and faith communities would turn into live shooting galleries. Bless you for the care you are providing to a generation of students — and to faculty and staff — who have had to adapt to this awful reality.

We've all had to adapt to it. And I just hate that. I hate it because it feels like there is so little we can do to change it.

I also hate it because of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said. "Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

I am 100% sure that Dr. King was 100% right about that.

And yet.

And yet I have given this question a lot of thought. And I am not sure what that principle might look like in practice in a world like ours, where mass shootings now occur with disheartening regularity.

I am sure that whatever it might look like, I'm not there yet. I am not yet ready to practice the kind of love that will drive out that kind of hate.

I read about how the UNCC shooter was smiling when he was led away by police. I'm going to be very, very honest with you today. If given the opportunity, I suspect I would have yielded to a less than loving impulse to wipe that smile off that man's face with my own hands.

In this still-Easter season, I would like very much for Riley C. Howell Lori Gilbert-Kaye, who are pictured on our bulletin this morning, to rise from the dead and visit not New Testament love but Old Testament justice -- an eye for an eye type of justice -- on the two shooters that targeted the members of their respective communities.

As your pastor, let me assure you that I hate that I even have thoughts like that. But I'm not going to deny it either, because I'll bet I'm not alone. I'll bet you're right there with me.

And if you're not, if you are out ahead of me on this question, if you know what this kind of love looks like in practice, then I will gladly yield this pulpit to you. Because I myself need to hear more about this love.

Because love is not what I feel for these shooters.

Love is not what I feel for the legislators in Washington, DC, who do nothing to defend the right of their constituents not to be shot when they go to church, or to the synagogue, or to the mosque, or to class, or to the movies. But who instead bow to the power of a lobby group that has turned assault weapons into a god whom they believe they are obliged to worship, no matter how terrible the cost.

In the spirit and memory of the brave and wonderful writer Rachel Held-Evans, I will also say that I do not love that we have a president who, in his tweets and at his rallies, continues to incite violence and stoke racial and religious animosity.

And love is certainly not what I feel for the national-level church leaders who support his efforts to divide America, and who themselves have alluded publicly to their own support for perpetrating acts of violence against our Muslim friends and neighbors.

Which is why the story we read today matters so much, because I think it points the way to what this love might look like, a love that is strong enough to drive out hate.

Our text for today is one of three post resurrection stories in John's gospel. Jesus has himself suffered from an act of unwarranted violence that appeared to bring his own life story to an end.

But it turns out that despite the best efforts of some very hateful, very violent, men to snuff out his life, Jesus was not done showing us what his love looks like. Divine love, redeeming love. The kind the kind of love that has the power to save us all.

But notice where he focuses that love.

After he rises from the tomb, Jesus does not seek out the men who put him there. He does not seek an audience with Pilate, or the religious leaders who couldn't tolerate his boundary-breaking love.

He does not track down the soldiers who arrested him, or the ones who nailed him to the cross.

He spent zero time trying to win these men over to his side. He made no effort to try to persuade them to give up their hateful, violent ways and join his love-based insurgency.

In this particular case, the post-resurrection Jesus appeared uninterested in loving his enemies. Instead, he spends his remaining time on earth feeding, restoring, and strengthening his friends for the task ahead of realizing the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven.

He meets Mary Magdalene at the tomb and comforts her as she weeps. He appears to his disciples, fearfully huddled together in an upper room, and offers to let the skeptical Thomas touch his wounds.

Later, he appears on a beach and makes breakfast for his famished and exhausted disciples.

I hope this will change in time, but right now, as of this moment, I don't yet love the shooters who perpetrate these crimes, and I do not love the legislators whose inaction and cowardice continues to enable them, or the national-level leaders, civic and religious, who seek to divide us.

But here's who I do love. I love the students at Warren Wilson College. I love the students at Owen High School. And I love you, the members of this congregation and I love all the children who are part of our church family.

It's that love, and my desire to protect them and you, that will lead me to pledge my strong and active support for candidates in the next election who have the moral courage to take on the gun lobby. I will do that in the hope of driving those candidates who are in the thrall of the NRA right out of office.

And I will support candidates at every level who espouse love over hate. Because I believe that America has been revealed under the current administration and I also believe it is now time for America to be healed. And it's going to take tremendous compassion and commitment from our leaders at every level -- civic and religious -- to do that.

That perhaps the first step on the road to NT Justice. Love-based justice.

I cannot drive out the hate in the heart of men who are so deranged that they will take the lives of innocent people whom they have never met. And I'm not going to spend time or money or effort trying to do that.

But I can drive the hate out of my own heart. And it is love that will do that. Love for you, for our children, for the students on this campus, love for our neighbors here in this valley.

If you're like me and are feeling anger and even hatred for these violent men who have hurt so many people, I hope that love can drive out the hate in your heart, too.

So that together we can focus our efforts on changing the things we can change, including the things we can no longer accept.

In this final post-resurrection story that we read for today, Jesus appears at the last to Peter. On that morning, Peter's heart may not have been filled with hate, but it was quite likely filled with profound shame and remorse for his roll in Jesus' death.

Peter, do you love me? Jesus says to a man who got it wrong again and again and again.

Yes, Lord, of course I love you. You know I do.

Okay then, feed my sheep. But Peter do you love me? He says to a man who is believed to have pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of a soldier who had come to arrest Jesus, meeting violence with violence.

Yes, Lord. Yes, yes, yes, of course I do.

Okay then, Feed my lambs. But Peter, do you really love me? He said to a man who, later that same night, would go on to deny knowing him, a man who failed to stand up for his beloved teacher and friend when violence was closing in around him.

Yes, Lord. You know everything; you know that I love you.

Okay then. Follow me.

Because love is still the way. And it is love alone that will save us.