

Second Sunday of Creation Care
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Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. John M. Pitzer

So I'm going to begin by telling you a story that I heard one of my priest friends tell, and I would say that this is one of the guys I travel with every summer. My priest buddies have been going on for a long time. You've heard me preach about them before.

Mickey is probably, probably the best preacher I've ever known personally. He's a phenomenal preacher. He's a great storyteller, and I happened to be at his church one Sunday when he told this story, and I think this is where I learned the phrase that I've told you before, what we say in the preaching world, all of our stories are true, and some of them really happened.

He said this one happened, so I'm going to take him at his word. It's very short and simple. There was an older man, probably in his early 80s, that lived in a mid-sized town in the Midwest, and he knew just about everybody on his block and everybody in the neighborhood, and people would walk by and wave at him, and periodically they would stop and they would visit.

He noticed one day that people were not walking by as often as they used to, and people were not stopping to visit as often as they used to because the neighborhood was changing.

And then one afternoon during the winter when it had been snowing a little bit, he had come back from the store, got out of his car, and was struggling a little bit to carry his groceries up the front steps of his porch, when all of a sudden a young boy, probably junior high age, appeared next to him who happened to be walking down the street, saw him struggling, took the grocery bags from him, checked the door, it had already been unlocked, he opened it, set the bags down.

And the old man, old man, older man, said, I don't know if that was a good laugh, thank you, I appreciate that. The old man said to the little young boy, you did not have to do that, that was so nice. And the young boy who was about junior high age, as I said, said, well my mom tells me all the time that I'm supposed to help people. And the old man said, your mom is teaching you very well.

They became friends. Periodically he would stop and go visit the old man. Then he got into high school, and he would still do the same thing. And then it was time for college, and when he went to college, he went to college in another state, and he didn't come home very often, so he didn't see his friend the old man very often. And when he graduated from college, the old man is now probably in his 90s, maybe mid-90s, and when he got home, his mom and dad said, you need to go, I don't know the name of a guy, you need to go see your friend, the parent said, because he's not doing very well.

So he went over, knocked on the door, and he answered the door. They had a really, really nice visit, and the old man said, you know, I will never forget the day I was struggling to get my groceries in the door, and you appeared and helped me with that. And the young man at this point said, oh come on, that was no big deal. I was just trying to help you with your groceries. He said, no, what you were doing, you were learning already at an early age, the importance of caring for others.

That's the end of the story, actually. It's a beautiful, simple story, my friends. It was an act of kindness and caring. It was also an act of love.

You see, often we think of acts of love being these grand examples, right, when something really big happens, and for whatever it is, an anniversary, or an engagement, or whatever, or somebody does something for someone that is just amazing. Well, it can be. Acts of love can easily be something big and grand, but they don't have to be.

Sometimes acts of love are little acts of kindness, like the boy did for the old man, like you do when you call someone that you know needs to talk, when you listen to

someone that needs to get someone something off their chest, when you make a pie, or a casserole, and send it to a friend's house because they have been in the hospital, or they've lost a loved one. They can be big and grand, but they don't have to be. The point is it's all about love.

So now we're going to transition just a little bit into the reading that I'm going to focus on today. Not focusing on the Old Testament, and I'm not even focusing on the gospel. It's been a long time since I made a decision to preach on Paul. Paul tries to be crazy, actually. I don't always agree with him. He can be a little tough.

Maybe that's a good thing.

But I'm going to focus on him today because the opening line in Paul's letter to the Romans, you could almost stop right after you hear that, and it says, you don't have to look at your program, I'm going to read it to you. This is how the reading begins: oh no one anything except to love one another. Oh no one anything except to love one another.

Now we need to understand the context of this particular letter. This is chapter 13. If you start at the beginning of chapter 13, it makes a little bit more sense on what he's saying. And this is what it says at the beginning, this is not in your program: let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

Then he says, you ready for this, pay your taxes. Thanks Paul. Give to everyone what you owe them. Then it says, oh no one anything, because you've paid your taxes, you paid everybody back. Oh no one anything except to love one another. He doesn't stop there. He keeps going, because if you love, you're keeping my commandments. And just in case people have forgotten what the commandments are, or just in case any of you have forgotten what the commandments are, this is what he says: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet.

And then he says, the same thing as he's really speaking Jesus talk here, all the laws are summed up in this: love your neighbor. Where does that come from? It comes from Jesus. You've heard me preach about it. You've heard Lex preach about it. You've heard Gary and Bobby preach about it.

When Jesus is confronted by the religious authorities, they ask him, what's the most important commandment? How in the world can we get that right, can he get that right, because there are 613 commandments that the Jews had to follow, 613. So how can he get this?

Jesus said, yeah I can tell you which one is the greatest. Hear oh Israel, love the Lord your God, with your heart, your soul, and your mind. The second one is like unto it, love your neighbor as yourself. Period. It's over.

Now you would think Paul would have stopped there, but he didn't, because Paul is Paul. Another little bit more context: Paul believed that the second coming of Jesus was going to take place in his lifetime. That's what Paul believed. Y'all do I need to remind you here we are 2,000 years later and we're still waiting for the second coming of Jesus, but Paul believed that the second coming was going to happen in his lifetime.

Well that's why he continues. That's why he didn't leave it alone. And that's when he says I want you to wake up. You don't got a lot of time. If Jesus, you've seen the bumper sticker, Jesus is coming back, look busy. You've seen that haven't you? Jesus is coming back, look busy. That could have come from Paul.

You got to wake up. You got to pay attention, because Jesus is on his way back. I want you to wake up, take off the acts of darkness, and I want you to put on the armor of light.

That in itself is a great imagery. And when you got up this morning, you most likely took off whatever you wore to bed, and you put on whatever you're going to wear to church. We do that every day. So that's pretty good imagery. We're always taking something off, and then putting something on.

So I took that a little further, and decided I would continue that train of thought of taking off, and putting on. Take off your old life. What does that mean, take off your old life? Whatever's not going well in your world, whatever's not going well in your life, whatever you're not happy about on your spiritual journey, take it off, and put on new life.

Take off bitterness. I've got a priest friend who was a Dominican with me, who now is an Episcopalian. He preached for you just a few weeks ago, Father Charlie. He loves to say, man do people love to live in the bitter barn. They're bitter about life. They're bitter about their job. They're bitter about their marriage. They're bitter about their children. They're about their church. They're bitter about their neighbors. Get out of the bitter barn. Take off bitterness, and put on grace.

Take off selfishness, when we only think about ourselves, and put on generosity, when we're always thinking of others, and wanting to help others. Take off pride. Put on humility.

Take off revenge. No one wakes up in the morning and says, yeah I'm gonna get that person back. We don't do that, I don't think. But subconsciously we do, because we have trouble forgiving. I often say forgiveness is the most difficult thing we do as followers of Jesus. The most difficult. We would rather hold a grudge. We would rather get a little revenge. So take off revenge, and put on forgiveness.

And finally take off hatred, and put on love.

My friends, if I had to kind of give you a little reader's digest, something for you to take, I'm always trying to get you to walk out of here with something. If I was going to do that, it might be difficult. Am I going to quote Paul and say, owe no one anything, but love love those who are around you, love your neighbor? Are we going to say what Jesus said, and what Paul said later, love the Lord your God with your heart, your soul, and your mind, and your neighbor, yourself? You see what I'm saying? There's too much.

So I mean this is what I'm going to give you. I read a commentary this week on this letter written by Paul to the Romans. Four words. We're going to make it into a little mantra prayer. It's so easy. You will be able to remember it in your sleep. And I want you to think about it today, this week, the upcoming week. Four words that sums everything up what we just heard from Paul: love God, love people.

That sounds so simple. Love God, love people. Period. Love God, love people. End of sentence. Love God, love people, even when you don't like them. Love God, love people, even if you don't want to. Because my friends, that's what it's all about. Over and over and over in scripture and in the gospels, we hear it's all about love, and Paul's letter today was full of it. So when we manage, when we can manage to love God and love people, the kingdom of God will be with us.

God bless you. Amen.