

August 15, 2021



Peace, Love, and Good Neighbors:
“LOVE EVERYONE ALWAYS”

1 John 4:7-12

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As many of you know, earlier this summer I took a little time for renewal following an incidence of Bell's Palsy that left me with some paralysis on the right side of my face. I remain deeply grateful to you for your prayers, cards, and words of encouragement, as well as the time away. Many continue to ask how I'm feeling and I've said, "I keep getting better each week." This past week, I began to say, "I'm not noticing much of anything that's left from that anymore." Maybe the doctor, or my wife, Dawn, who can see what I can't, will still see some signs of it, but I feel really good.

At the same time, I'm trying to learn the importance of pacing myself in the time since that day in June. It's all too easy to get caught up in the moment and to lose track of what's important in our lives, isn't it? Sometimes, we even miss the simple lessons that we think we've learned in the past; like the impact that stress can have on our bodies as well as our souls and spirits. Or that recreation is not just about having fun, but about our need for times of re-creation. Isn't there something in the scriptures about "remembering the Sabbath" and "keeping it holy"? God has created us for Sabbath and given Sabbath as a gift to us. I'm sure it's not just about being in church on Sunday morning.

I don't know about you, but when I take that time to be re-created, it's then that I tend to hear better from God. Do you know what I'm getting at? Sometimes, we can keep running and running and find ourselves struggling to hear, but when we stop, we start to see with new eyes. That seemed to happen all the time while I was on leave the other month.

In addition to a variety of doctor's appointments while I was away, Dawn and I had a few moments to do some travelling and enjoying time with our family. We took our youngest nieces, Andi and Ella, my sister's daughters, on a quick road trip for a couple of days here in Michigan. As we were loading their bags into the truck, I noticed that Andi, the three year old, had a couple of extra bags with her suitcase. I asked her what was in there and she said, "My loveys!" For those of you who don't know, we used to call them "stuffed animals" when I was a kid. Or "baby dolls," because those count as "loveys," too.

Andi is at an age where “loveys” are among the list of her favorite things. They’re better than mac and cheese and Spaghettios. Her bedroom is full of them. Since she’s so tiny, she has plenty of room to fill them up on her double bed. And when we go out, she’s always on the hunt for the next one. Her favorite color is pink, so any lovey that’s pink will work for her. She makes it really easy when the time comes to buy presents for her.

One morning on our trip, as we were waiting for our table at a restaurant for breakfast, Andi noticed the gift shop and asked if we could take a look. So we strolled over there to check it out. Well, it wasn’t long before Andi was picking up one lovey after another and giving it a hug. When I asked her what she was doing, she said, “I need to love all the loveys.” I was so glad when our pager buzzed for our table that morning.

This week, we’re taking Andi on her first vacation that will include an airplane ride. She’s really excited. Trying to get ahead of ourselves, we gave her packing instructions. When Aunt Dawn told her that she could only bring one lovey, knowing that she’ll probably pick up a couple on the trip, Andi asked her to come into her room to help her pick it out. Standing in the middle of the room with Dawn, she held her head and said, “There’s so many, I just can’t decide.” Dawn still insists on one, but I think we’ll most likely end up with two. Andi just wants every lovey to feel loved. Some days, it’s refreshing to see the innocent love of a three year old, but love is just not that simple, is it?

In 1965 (ten years before my time), lyricist Hal David and composer Burt Bacharach wrote the words and tune to a song that singer Jackie DeShannon would make famous that same year:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love.
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is love, sweet love.
No not just for some, but for everyone.¹

I was reading earlier this week that they originally offered the song to Dionne Warwick, but she turned it down, saying that it was “too country” and “too preachy” for her. Later, however, she ended up recording it twice.² Perhaps for Warwick and for the millions who have grown to love the song, there is something in that “preachy, country song” that speaks to all of us. Certainly, the world needs more love, but love is just not that simple, is it?

This week, many shuddered as U.S. troops were sent back to Afghanistan to get embassy personnel out of Kabul safely. Tribal leaders were at war once again, reclaiming the country almost en-masse following the removal of troops not too long ago as we watch the established government quickly fade away. War and violence has taken hold once more. My heart breaks and our souls cry out yet again.

At times, it’s easy to see the most extreme examples of political, religious and tribal separations in our world in places like Afghanistan. Wondering when it might ever end for the many innocent people who are caught in the crossfires of decades of fighting, the words of a 1965 favorite song might simply be, well, too simple...too folksy...too country...too preachy when faced with the complicated dynamics of a culture so different from our own.

Or is the culture that different from our own? Or do we have a tribalism of our own? Between different ideologies? Do we draw up our own sides as well, ready to engage to the bitter end? Oh, maybe the end is not as bitter as bombs, but could it be bitter nonetheless when we no longer seek to understand, but simply to win the argument; to convert or to leave the opponent by the side of the road?

I wonder if at times it has even spread to the Church. Do we get so caught up in our passions and engaged in winning at all costs? But who wins when communities, families, and even the Church is divided? One side or the other? Or neither?

John, the elder writes to the early Christian community, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

Certainly, we’d agree that John is right. Jesus’ life teaches us that God loves everyone and we’re called to do the same. Jesus even tells us to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us. How in the world do we do that?

Within our communities, within our families, and even in the Church, there are some folks who are just difficult to love. Do you know anyone like that? Sometimes we say, “Well, I love them, but I don’t like them.”

The Church is an amazing creation of God. God gives us one another and tells us to love one another, all the while knowing that there are some people in the Church that we love to love and some that are just so different than us. I love the people I talk to during the coffee hour, but when I step foot in church, I also see those folks who cut me off the other day in traffic. Or even worse, I see those people with the political signs out their yards. How could a good Christian vote for...? You name it! Loving people isn’t necessarily easy.

Then again, there are days when it’s not easy to love me. Do you ever have those moments? Just ask my wife, she’ll tell you. It’s the same in the Church. Could it be that it’s the same for our neighbors?

Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as... YOURSELF!”

How in the world do we love those neighbors that are more like enemies? Can we really love everyone always?

In his book, *Everyone Always*, Bob Goff suggests that loving people is an act of the will. Sometimes, he simply asks God to help him love the difficult person in front of him for the next 30 seconds. And then the next 30 seconds. And so on. Until he not only acts in love for 30 seconds but begins to feel more love for that person. Sounds easy enough, but maybe not today. Especially not in a day when politicians go after members of their own party and family members have drawn up sides against one another over differences.

In his book, *The Hopeful Neighborhood: What Happens When Christians Pursue the Common Good*, author Don Everts tells the story of a man named Patrick Greene, who lived in Henderson County, Texas. It seems that Patrick was an atheist who had been filing lawsuits and complaints for some thirty years against the county and its officials because their actions unconstitutionally supported Christianity in his mind.

One year, Patrick filed suit against the county yet again, arguing that they needed to remove the nativity scene that had been placed in front of the county courthouse for years. It probably wasn't long before Patrick had become "public enemy number one" yet again.

On the other hand, Patrick had come to see Christians as being "narrow-minded" folks who hadn't been very kind to him throughout his life. In 2012, however, something changed for Patrick and for the Christians around him. Patrick had a detached retina, and he didn't have the \$20,000 he needed for the surgery at the time. He realized that he would most likely become blind with no way of supporting himself and his wife.

When a Christian woman named Jessica heard Patrick's story, she got together with some friends from church and they raised the money to help Patrick. In fact, when other Christians heard about Patrick's plight, they, too, chipped in with thousands of dollars to help out Patrick and his wife.

Patrick was caught off guard by the response of Jessica and these Christians in Henderson County. He had never had that kind of care and love from the Church before. Patrick was so thankful that he wanted to do something for Jessica and her friends to witness his gratitude. So he purchased a star to go on top of the nativity on the courthouse lawn.

Some days, it's too easy to draw our lines in the sand, against others and even one another. Yet, when we learn to love one another we can really change the world, one neighborhood at a time.

John, the elder said, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

I think I saw God last month as a little girl took one lovey off the shelf after another. I hope I can look into the eyes of those that I see as "others" and see one more "lovey," created in the image of God, needing a little love. And when I do, I hope they can see God, too. Can it be that simple?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_the_World_Needs_Now_Is_Love

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_the_World_Needs_Now_Is_Love