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“Loving Our Neighbors’ Children, Too”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Deuteronomy 6: 1-9; Matthew 22: 34-46

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I want to talk about three things, on this final Sunday
of the National Children’s Sabbath.

I want to talk about *the story*, and that means the Jesus story.

Then I want to venture into *all things considered*,
which means other relevant stories related to the Jesus story.

And finally I want to conclude with *the state of things*.

Sound familiar? Stay tuned...

First, *the story*...

The Pharisees are at it again, trying to trap Jesus in a verbal snare.

This is the last of four question & answer encounters in Jerusalem,
between Jesus and the Jewish leaders during the final days of Jesus’ life.

Just prior, Jesus has managed to silence the Sadducees,

so now the Pharisees bait the trap with a classic question,
a frequently asked question in Judaism:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

This is not a new or unusual question.

Jewish rabbis have long been weighing commandments,

classifying all 613 of them into categories of heavy and light,
must and shall, absolute or conditional,
to discern what is essential or non-essential to faithfulness.
And Jesus lays down the law, as my mother would say.
From the Shema, Judaism's Confession of Faith, in Deuteronomy 6:5
he quotes, "Love the Lord your God
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind";
and from Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself.
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments," Jesus says.

The pivotal word here is "love", agape love in Greek:
the rarest kind of love mentioned in the New Testament,
the next to impossible kind of love which lies outside the bounds
of either desiring love or friendship love;
the kind of love that seeks NOT it's own good,
but rather seeks the good of the other first;
selfless love; self-giving love.

All the Law and the Prophets hang on this verb, Jesus implies.
And the pivotal shape of this selfless love, this self-giving love
is a triangle.

We live in one Triangle: a Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill Triangle.

And as Christians we live out another triangle, according to Jesus:

a God, self, neighbor triangle

where there is an inseparability that marks the three components.

Without any one side of the figure, the agape triangle collapses

into a flat line of humanism or agnosticism or atheism, perhaps,

because there are plenty of people

who are incredibly good at loving themselves and loving their neighbors,

without ever having God as part of the equation at all.

But it is in this agape triangle, that

the identity and nature of God finds expression,
and that our self-identity as Christians takes form.
This is the key to understanding all the law and the prophets, Jesus says.
Jesus will rule by self-less, self-giving love,
characterized by humility, kindness and justice,
that will simply help people because they need help,
whether we stand to get anything out of it or not.

Now I want to venture into *all things considered*,
and what I want us to consider is this:
How difficult would it be to bulge that agape triangle out
to include loving our neighbors' children, too?
In considering all things for writing this sermon,
I am reminded of the cartoon *Dennis the Menace*,
created by Hank Ketcham in 1950, mere months after the birth of
another cartoon depicting the antics of a group of children, *Peanuts*.
Dennis is the 5 ½ year old boy-next-door who never grows up.
He can be honest, inquisitive, charming, endearing, mischievous,
and anything but dull.
His behavior is as unpredictable as the unruly cowlick in his hair.
Dennis is a perpetual handful to his parents, Henry and Alice Mitchell,
a fearless leader to little child-friend, Joey,
a constant irritant to female child-friend, Margaret,
and a thorn in the flesh to gruff, curmudgeonly neighbor Mr. Wilson.
In the few cartoons that I snipped from the funny pages these past weeks,
I saw Dennis threatening to put his "coolest" bug down Margaret's back,
critiquing an author at a book signing
for not including enough pictures in his book;
advising a single male neighbor that unless he gets married,
he'll never know when he's doing something wrong;

and wondering out loud why his teacher looks at him every Friday
and says "TGIF"!

And I want to make the argument that the reason *Dennis the Menace*
has enjoyed such a long run in newspaper syndication,
58 years and going strong,
is because loving our neighbors' children is one of
the most difficult tasks we are called to undertake as Jesus people.

Dennis the Menace is a much greater threat than the evil trade federation
of Star Wars' mythical *Phantom Menace*, because he lives
not on another planet or in another solar system,
but down the street or next door,
where he puts our faith to the test every day
by threatening to collapse our agape triangle into a single flat line.

Have you ever experience a child like that,
who put your faith on the line every day?

We had one of those, once-upon-a-neighborhood:
a cute, six-year-old, red-headed little dickens.

He was a year younger than our oldest child,
and a year older than our second child;
a next-door neighbor from a good family,
potentially, a good play-mate for our children.

But the potential began to pale when he would ring the front doorbell
at 7 a.m. to inquire if our children could come out and play;
and if we didn't respond immediately,
he'd come around to every window and peer in and tap on the pane,
like the morning version of the nursery rhyme, *Wee Willy Winkie*.

His parents said he could come over any time,
and that we were free to discipline him if he ever misbehaved,

which I should have realized at the time was a veiled warning.
In a pile-on of mischievous deeds he managed, along with his food,
to eat the paper napkins at the dinner table;
to take all the children's Frisbees and throw them on the roof;
and ultimately, to take a tennis racquet and to swat and kill all
the butterflies and bees on our butterfly bush,
and then to break and kill the butterfly bush, too.

That did it for me: this blatant lack of reverence for life.

I should have loved him better, I felt.

I should have been able to bulge my agape triangle
to include loving my neighbor's child.

I should have been able to apply my theology to neighborology
not just at church, but on the home-front as well.

But I pretty much failed with this child.

I finally had to tell his parents that I didn't want the responsibility
of disciplining their child.

Loving our neighbors' children is one of the most difficult tasks
which we are called to undertake as Jesus people.

The menace is real, and the challenge is constant.

But that agape triangle must be expanded to include
not just our own children, but our neighbors' children as well.

Mary Pipher, in her book, *The Shelter of Each Other*,
mentions a Native American concept, a Sioux word, *tiospaye*,
which means "the people with whom one lives".

"The *tiospaye* is probably closer to a kibbutz than any other Western institution,"
she says.

"The *tiospaye* gives children multiple parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents.
It offers children a corrective factor for problems in their nuclear families.

If **parents** are difficult, there are other adults around

to soften and diffuse the situation.”

(I like the way she speaks of “difficult parents” and not “difficult children”!)
“Until the 1930s, when the *tiospaye* began to fall apart with the sale of land,
migration and alcoholism, there was not much mental illness
among the Sioux.

When all adults were responsible for all children, people grew up healthy,”
she says.

“What *tiospaye* offers and what biological family offers
is a place that all members can belong to regardless of merit.

Everyone is included regardless of health, likeability or prestige.

What’s most valuable about such institutions is that people are in
by virtue of being born into the group.

People are in even if they’ve committed a crime, been a difficult person,
become physically or mentally disabled or are unemployed and broke.

That ascribed status was what Robert Frost valued when he wrote
that home ‘was something you somehow hadn’t to deserve’.”

(Pipher. *The Shelter of Each Other*. p. 23)

The church is a *tiospaye*, don’t you think?

It gives our children multiple parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

It offers children a corrective factor for problems in their nuclear families.

It helps them mediate situations when parents become difficult.

The church can be that home which they “somehow hadn’t to deserve”,
that place of unmerited favor, that place where God’s grace

draws an agape triangle around each child

like a Celtic *caim* prayer which would encircle and surround them
with the protective and watchful love of the triune God.

But can we expand that *tiospaye* to include other children,
even beyond our nuclear and church families,

to families in the community which may be different from ours,

and to other families which may bear no resemblance to
ours whatsoever?

Can we bulge that agape triangle out to include loving our
neighbors' children, too?

I ask this of you, because I asked this of myself two weeks ago,
when I experienced *the state of things* in the Triangle first hand.
I was asked by the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham
to help conduct the candlelight vigil for William Davis,
our one-legged friend who used to stand,
propped up by a single crutch, and greet us at the intersection of
Exit 12 off Highway 147 and Roxboro Street.

William was stabbed and murdered in an altercation on April 12.

The suspect is still at large.

We held his vigil on the spot where he was murdered,
about a mile from here, across Highway 147, on the corner
where Piedmont and Scout street meet.

There was a makeshift spray of styrofoam and blue plastic flowers on the spot
where he died.

On the opposite corner across the street, another man had recently
been shot and killed as well.

As we assembled the banner that indicated a vigil was about to take place,
a neighbor shouted out to warn us about walking in the tall grass,
where we might step on a broken needle.

Four police cars came and surrounded our funeral crowd
like a Celtic caim prayer.

Carol Johnson came with her walker. She can tell you about the experience.

Young neighborhood boys skulked around the periphery like stray dogs.

One toddler, a little boy with a pacifier in his mouth,
kicked at a soccer ball during the vigil.

No wonder William came down to the highway to stand and greet passers-by,
come rain or shine.

It was safe there. People were friendly there.

People knew him and called him by name.

People brought him food to eat and clothes to keep him warm.

Our church served as a mobile *tiospaye* to William,

as an agape triangle to William,

as a protective Celtic caim prayer to William

as we triangled and circled him traveled to and fro to the church.

But, ultimately, we could not protect William from the difficult adults

with whom he lived.

And our adults and our Sunday School children made cards for his mother,

and took them and held hands and prayed on the corner

where he used to stand.

And a toddler, a little boy with a pacifier in his mouth,

kicked at a soccer ball during his vigil.

And as bright and beautiful as downtown Durham is becoming;

as much as the Research Triangle Park is drawing jobs to the area;

as exciting it is to see the new Performing Arts Center open,

and to welcome tenants and residents into a renovated downtown area,

the state of Durham's children is anything but exemplary.

With 4,194 births in 2006, and 22,308 children from ages birth- five,

22.9% of those children are living in poverty,

and 45.5% of those children are living in low-income families.

That's half of our children, friends, in Durham County, living

in low-income families.

1,053 or 25.1% of the births in 2006 were to mothers with less

than a high school education.

191 children ages birth-6 had substantiated reports of abuse or neglect
in 2007.

(Statistics from "Getting Ready: Indicators of Health in Durham County",
Published by Durham's Partnership for Children, 2008)

And a toddler, a little boy with a pacifier in his mouth,
kicked at a soccer ball during William's vigil.

And I wonder what that child's future holds for him.

ALL THINGS are not bright and beautiful in Durham County.

Can we bulge that agape triangle to include loving our neighbors' children, too?

"All of the law and all of the prophets hang on these two commandments,"

Jesus says,

"to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind", and to "love your neighbor as yourself."

We live in one Triangle, and we are called as Jesus people,
and to live out another triangle:

a triangle of agape love which helps children simply because they need our help,
whether we stand to get anything out of it or not.

You see, even in Dennis the Menace's neighborhood,

a *tiopsaye* exists, because whether he would admit it or not,

Mr. Wilson plays the role of surrogate grandfather to Dennis,

and occasionally, a hint of a smile spreads across his face.

And a toddler, a little boy with a pacifier in his mouth,

kicked at a soccer ball during William's vigil. Amen.