



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Love Them Too”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Acts 10

June 19, 2016

So, this is one of the truly daunting tasks of Ministry. What do you say? A week after tragedies such as that which struck an Orlando night club last weekend, and after 7 days of mind-numbing pontification from most every corner of our media-hyped society, what does a preacher from the North Shore say to offer anything constructive to the mix? In the wake of a tragedy such as this, we watch as politicians bloviate, advocates from every angle spin realities to serve their purposes, and suddenly a horrific event that resulted in the loss of dozens of innocent and promising lives is reduced to fodder for endless debates on gun-control, immigration, national security, and on and on and on. Within hours of the loss of life our national consciousness forgets about the devastation that has been born into so many lives and hones in, instead, on the agendas, priorities and advocacies we've decided will be the issue of the day this time around.

So, what am I to add, constructively, to all of that? In some ways, if I'm truly honest about it, I don't know what to say. I have my thoughts on some of these issues – but I am the first to know that there are MANY people out there much more versed, and smarter, than I, and I know that this pulpit is no place to echo the

media-driven circus of issue advocacy that has overtaken our society over the last 7 days. So, in some ways (perhaps many ways), I don't have the answers to many of the questions we've been asking, any better than many of you. But, the more I considered what I would say this morning – the more I reflected on how I might try to offer something constructive to what has been anything but a constructive week of national discourse – the more I have been drawn to the simple truth that, if nothing else, we ought to start where Jesus started. The more I have considered the questions that have been running through my mind, the more I have been compelled that, as Christians, perhaps the starting point is to make sure we stop being among those who live out their faith based on who is 'in' and who is 'out!'

As I have reflected on the events, dialogs and hype of this past week – and as I considered all of that in relation to our passage from Acts this morning – I was blown away by the reality that some debates, in faith, simply never change. It seems that, from the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus (and quite long before that in other faiths), there has been a recurring and never-ending debate about who is, and who is not, worthy of God's love. It seems that, from the outset of what we know as the Christian faith, there has been a ceaseless battle over who is 'in,' and who is 'out.' That's what this story of Peter is really all about. It's one of those passages that tends to lose its meaning without a little context and understanding, but that's what we're talking about here.

In short form – we have to understand that, to the Jewish people of Jesus' time, the list of the 'untouchables' was long and exhaustive. People of other cultures, sinners, tax collectors, the ill, the diseased, the list went on and on of those people who were to be kept at a distance in order to maintain a clean and virtuous life of faith. And, that's precisely how Peter would have seen the Gentiles. The word

‘Gentile,’ to the Jewish people of the time, essentially meant ‘everyone else.’ Those people who were not of the house of God, those who were not of the Jewish people, were the Gentiles who were viewed, by many, as unworthy of God.

And, that’s precisely the understanding the earliest followers of Jesus had of their faith. Remember, the earliest ‘Christians’ were Jewish. These were people of the Jewish faith who understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of their faith. So, to them, everything that applied to their understanding of Judaism applied to their understanding of this new chapter of Judaism that had unfolded in the person and ministries of Jesus. In other words – there’s simply no way Peter would have gone off to the Gentiles to spread the Gospel – because Peter knew full well that the Gentiles weren’t worthy of the Gospel. They were unclean, in many cases. They were untouchable. They were to be avoided for the sake of maintaining one’s piety and purity – they didn’t deserve, and weren’t going to receive, the Gospel message – because the Gospel message belonged to the Jews. But, then God drops this vision in front of Peter, a table full of all of those unclean foods Peter knows a good Jewish person isn’t supposed to eat, and God proclaims, ‘Do not label anything unclean that I have made clean.’ In other words, ‘Nope – we love them too!’

It is, simply, another in a long line of examples of this never-ending debate in our faith – our perpetual attempt to articulate the limits of who is worthy of God’s love (and, in turn, who is worthy of ours), and God’s repeated response that we are consistently wrong in the limits we seek to set. Think about it...

- The Pharisees are ready to stone that woman for her infidelity but Jesus steps in and proclaims, ‘Nope – we love her too!’

- The Jewish leaders argue with Jesus as he sits with sinners and tax collectors for a meal and exclaims, ‘Nope – we love them too!’
- The people are aghast as Jesus sits in the home of a Pharisee and has his feet washed by a sinful woman, but Jesus doesn’t waver: ‘Nope – we love her too!’
- Jesus’ followers are offended when Jesus decides to go to the home of Zacchaeus, that deplorable tax collector, but Jesus’ message is clear: ‘We love him too.’
- Jesus hangs on the cross and looks to the criminals at his side and the guards at his feet and declares, ‘Yes – we love them too!’
- Sinners, cheats, liars, diseased, outcasts – it didn’t matter who you were or what you did, every time society would seek to draw that line in the sand and proclaim someone unworthy of God’s love (and thus, unworthy of ours), Jesus would reply with the same message, ‘Nope – we love them too!’

And, for nearly two thousand years since, we have continued with that perpetual effort to draw a line in the sand and declare someone, somewhere, as unworthy of God’s love. Gender, culture, nationality, race, heritage, churchmanship, lifestyle, sexual orientation, political perspective...the list goes on and on of the countless places in which Christians have tried, and continue to try, to draw a line in the sand in regards to God’s grace, love and mercy. Yet, every time we have labeled someone as unworthy of God’s love, God’s message that has been proclaimed since the beginning of Jesus’ ministry has been proclaimed again, to us, as we have been reminded that, ‘No – We love them too.’

Now, clearly this is not just a reality of the Christian faith. That which happened in Orlando last week came from an entirely different religious background, but in many ways it still stems from the same underlying human desire to draw our lines in the sand. It seems to be a reflection of basic human nature. For some reason (and I have my theories, but that's a conversation for another time) – for some reason, humanity has this innate desire to articulate the boundaries of God's love as we define who is 'in' and who is 'out.' For some reason, we have the insatiable need to define who is, and who is not, worthy of God's love (and, by extension, who is and who is not worthy of ours). But, every time we try to draw the line – every time we try to make our box of who is in and who is out – God sweeps our lines away as He proclaims without ceasing and without equivocation, 'No – we love them too!'

In the last week we have asked ourselves, and one another, so many questions. Why? How? What do we do? How do we stop it? Why would God let this happen? There are more questions than I could possibly list, much less attempt to answer, in this message. And, if I'm honest about it, I have to admit that many of them are questions to which I have no better answers than many of you. As our national consciousness gets swept up in the agendas and pontification, however, I think we, as Christians, can start with this – stop drawing lines in the sand! Stop worrying about, or even considering, who is in and who is out! Celebrate and rejoice in the love and grace of God that is ours, no matter who or what we are or have been, and extend that same love and grace to the lives of everyone you meet!

Is that the be all and end all solution to extremism and tragedy in our culture? Of course not! Is a wider Christian message of love and grace over exclusivity and judgment going to change the hearts of terrorists? No! But, as sometimes

unwitting participants in that never-ceasing human desire to draw a line between 'us' and 'them,' I think it's a place to start. And, at least for today, it's the one constructive thing I can add to the conversation.