

Clackamas United Church of Christ
Rev. Adam Ericksen
3.8.20

**For God So Loved Your Atheist, Jewish, Muslim, Poor, Rich, Undocumented,
Brown, Black, White, LGBTQ Neighbor**

On Friday morning I had coffee with Shane Kavanaugh. Shane is a journalist with the Oregonian. We got to know each other last year through a few stories he did on our church. Shane and I check in with each other over social media periodically, but we decided it was time to meet in person.

Shane asked me what was on my mind these days. There are a few things at the forefront of my mind, things that seem to put us at risk. One of those things is the coronavirus. So I told Shane about my worries and the different levels of anxiety that I have and the different levels of anxiety that I sense in our congregation. I told him that we have made some changes to our worship service in response to the virus, and that I don't want to downplay or overplay the dangers or risks. I mean, how do we appropriately prepare for this without adding to the anxiety and fears that folks already have?

As I continued expressing my fears and anxieties about how to deal with fear and anxiety, Shane listened patiently and when I finished he looked at me with compassion in his eyes as he said, "Well, I'm not very religious, but it sounds like it might be a good time to remind people to love their neighbors."

"Oh right," I thought. "That's the point."

Shane continued to say that our culture generally trains us to think primarily about ourselves. We are trained to wonder about potential health risks, "How is this going to affect me?" Fear tends to make us focus on ourselves. He said that we need to move away from a "me" only mentality so that we become concerned about others. Part of the problem, Shane said, is that people do need to stay home when they feel sick, but that staying at home leads to a feeling of isolation, especially among those of us who are older. So we need to routinely check in on our neighbors and friends to see how they are doing so that they don't feel alone.

To which I wanted to say, "How about you preach the sermon this Sunday morning?"

As our conversation continued, we discussed my other major anxiety, the current political climate. The risks seem so high. I lamented the fact that just six months ago it felt like everyone was pretty much on the same team and now it feels so angry, fragmented, and hostile. Personally, I'm feeling exhausted by it all.

Shane lamented, too. He replied that it all feels very tribal and that this tribal mentality goes back thousands if not hundreds of thousands of years. It's an us against them mentality and was beneficial in our evolutionary process as it united a group when it came to the risk of outside invaders. But now it seems to put us in greater threats of danger as it feels out of control, affecting at greater levels every aspect of our culture, including politics and religion.

And as Shane talked, my mind was making connections to the studying I did last week about our readings for today. I think it's true that tribalism has always plagued humanity. The bond

within a family or tribe is a good thing, but becomes dangerous when we define our tribe against another tribe. This leads to division and hostility against people based on race, ethnicity, religion, political party, gender, sexuality, the list goes on.

We see this tribal division in the Bible, too. It's easy to find where the Bible divides the world into us against them. I've come to believe that the Bible was written by people who were trying to understand how God was working in their lives. Sometimes they got it wrong - like when they fell into the trap of believing that God was tribal - that God loved them and hated their enemies.

But sometimes the authors of the Bible got it right. Like in our passage from Genesis this morning. The Jewish, Christian, and Islamic stories really start with a man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah. Abraham and Sarah began their lives together just like everyone else back then - living in their own tribe where they thought that their gods were for them and against their enemies. But then Abraham and Sarah encountered something new in human history. They encountered a god who came to them and said, "Go from your country and your kindred ... and I will bless you ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

I want to invite you to see something different here. The God of Abraham and Sarah is different. This is a notch forward in human social evolution. This God is not tribal. This God is universal.

Abraham and Sarah were blessed by God, but they were not to keep the blessing for themselves. They had a purpose that was beyond themselves. They were to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

All the families.

The poor families.

The rich families.

The heterosexual families.

The lesbian and gay and bisexual and transgender and queer families.

Undocumented families.

Ill families.

Muslim families.

Atheist families.

Republican families.

Democratic families.

The black families.

The brown families.

The white families.

All the families. There were no exceptions.

Jesus knew that this was true. He knew that God wasn't tribal, which is why he said those famous words in our passage today, "For God so loved the world..." The word for "world" in Greek here is "Kosmos." For God so loved the Cosmos. All of it. God's love isn't just for you and it's not just for me. It's not just for people who look and act like us. It's for people who are radically different from us, too. In fact, God loves the entire cosmos.

Jesus was formed by this vision of God that goes all the way back to Abraham and Sarah.

But I want you to notice something else about this story of faith. It is risky. But it's a different kind of risk than the coronavirus and our current political turmoil. It's an intentional risk that seeks to move beyond our comfort zones, beyond ourselves and our tribe, so that we might love our neighbors, especially those most in need.

Abraham and Sarah would have had a nice life living in their tribe. They could have stayed in their comfort zones as they primarily worried about themselves and their tribe. But Abraham and Sarah heard God's call. And Jesus heard the call, too. He didn't stay in his hometown of Nazareth. Instead, he left his comfort zone as he traveled all around Israel and Samaria, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, blessing the poor, and preaching the Good News that God is love.

And this takes some about of faith, doesn't it? To leave our comfort zones on this journey and, as Shane said to me on Friday, to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

During this time of political turmoil and health crisis, what can we do? Wash your hands. Disinfect areas you frequently use. Stay home when you are sick. Do not minimize what others are feeling. All of that is sound advice.

But the age-old wisdom keeps coming back. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. People are going to feel isolated. If you notice someone hasn't been to church or you haven't seen a neighbor in a while, give them a phone call. Write them a letter. The challenge for our current time is to move beyond ourselves, beyond our tribe, so that we may take the journey beyond our comfort zones to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

May we take that risk together.

May we journey on the path together.

And as we risk the journey together, may the God who loves the entire world be embodied in us. Amen.