

As I went to write this message I came across my son's "Scholastic News" that he received from his school. It is titled "We're Better Together" and is about Martin Luther King, Jr. Inside it asks in simple terms: "Dr. King said we should use words to solve problems. Imagine someone pushes you on the playground. You get angry and want to push back. What would you do?"

I am going to start our message today with Matthew 22:39: "And a second (commandment) is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." I am going to be breaking this message down in two parts: first, loving your neighbor, and then loving yourself and ways that both can intersect.

In Matthew 5:43-48 it states: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

That sounds like a tall order to be asked to be perfect like our heavenly Father, and it can feel like loving your enemy does require perfection as it is certainly not an easy thing to do.

In one of our earlier book club reads, we read the book "Love Without Limits". This book is really good for teaching to love all people. In one of the chapters the author talks about her experiences as a professor with a student named Darren Rodeo. Darren Rodeo would consistently come to her class and challenge things she and other students were saying. She reported that he often said offensive and hurtful things. She was surprised to see that he signed up for another class of hers during another term. What the author did before starting any class was go through her roster of students and pray individually for each person, despite her feelings for them. She stated, "One day during my prayers, a revelation struck me: the reason God made love a commandment and not a fun intramural option like flag football was because of the Darren Rodeos in our lives. If love for

people-who-make-our-lives-less-than-wonderful was a choice, well, God knew, no one would ever sign up. Love's not extracurricular; it's the curriculum." The author later shared a story about how Darren Rodeo was upset one day for something grievous that had happened, and said he felt safe to talk to this professor about it. Imagine if we could leave a sense of safety for those around us, even to those who we think we are very different from.

You may hear some people say: "Love is a verb." If we are honest with ourselves, having warm fuzzy feelings towards people is not always easy, and sometimes can feel impossible. And I don't see anywhere where it is a requirement to feel these cozy feelings. I also don't see where I have to "like" people, but as Christians we are commanded to love them. Feelings are not good or bad, they just communicate a need. But when I intentionally choose to BEHAVE in a way that is not vengeful, that seeks to have empathy by seeing the Light in all people, and extend thoughts of loving kindness and pray for those who have harmed me, I feel the release of tension physiologically and in my spirit. I cannot control other people. But I can choose to focus on what is good, and not ruminate on hating my neighbor. It is normal and necessary to sit with our feelings and our thoughts and process through our experiences, while harmful ruminating can be an active choice and behavior to loop in ways that are unproductive.

Love as a verb can take many forms. When we look to Jesus as an example, He was far from sitting quietly, avoiding conflict and not standing up against injustices. He was not a doormat. Kazu Haga wrote in his book "Healing Resistance" that sometimes doing nothing is an act of violence, and isn't love. If we see someone being harmed and we ignore it, this is not love, and it is not nonviolence. I would also argue that it is not love to allow ourselves to be abused and treated poorly; it gives the message that it is acceptable for people to be treated that way. Turning the other cheek is not a verse to allow people to abuse you. When you look at the historical context, it was a powerful and creative way to engage in non-violent resistance. Quoting Dawn Wilson: "In 'On Turning the Other Cheek (and How It Doesn't Mean What You Think It Means),' Corey Farr explained that a slap on the right cheek meant the soldier *backhanded* the Jews, which was a far more demeaning slap. 'It was degrading,' he said. 'It was what you gave to an inferior or a slave.' To not break down emotionally and simply turn the other cheek meant that the soldier couldn't slap you again on the right cheek, and, Farr said, 'he can't slap you with his left hand,

because that is unclean for both of you.’ The soldier’s only option was to slap with the palm of his hand, and ‘this was not the way to slap a slave. This was reserved for equals.’ Thus, in giving the other cheek, the degraded person asserted his humanity in a brave countermove — a humble response, yet also an act of courage against an oppressive system.”

Another quote in Kazu Haga’s book is: “Solidarity isn’t about developing a condescending or patronizing savior complex. It is about being in relationship to people because we understand that our liberation is ultimately dependent on their liberation and vice versa. This means that our liberation is not only bound up with the liberation of Indigenous communities, Black communities, or other marginalized communities, but it is also bound up with, say, the liberation of _____. ” ...We need to work for the liberation of _____’s liberation not only for his own sake, but because the safety of the people we love depend on it. The best way to protect those that we love is to love those who may hurt them.” (I have chosen to omit the specific person mentioned as I feel you can put anyone’s name in here that feels fitting).

Love as a verb may mean not striking back, not hitting below the belt, or seeking an eye for eye. For some, it could be the powerful move of walking away and removing yourself from a situation. If we find it hard to act in a place of love, removal may be appropriate. Especially in situations where people are harming us. In Mark 6:11 Jesus told His disciples: “And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” The context in which he was referring was about going to villages and sharing His message, but I think it shows that Jesus Himself gives us permission to leave places and situations where people do not listen or welcome us. It does not encourage us to beg to be heard.

Another way to demonstrate love through action is by giving a gentle answer. Proverbs 15:1 says “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” This verse really stands out to me during a moment in my life where I was not at my best. I just had a traumatic birth and was hooked up to IVs for blood transfusions and antibiotics. My birth experience was dehumanizing and I felt powerless. One day a nurse walks into my suite, and I can’t remember what I said, but it wasn’t very nice. Her response was a quiet “Thank you for allowing me to serve you today.” I

immediately softened and realized that my own harshness wasn't necessary, and this nurse had a really strong impact in buffering some of the challenges I went through.

It can be very hard to love certain people, and for me that is people who harm others without remorse. What I have personally noticed is that when I saturate myself in hateful thoughts towards the people who have harmed me and others, it literally does nothing but harm me more. I get bitter. I feel the cortisol running through my body. It is, as some people now say, "I am letting them live rent-free in my mind." Research has even shown that chronic unforgiveness can cause cardiovascular issues. I don't believe this hate is worth my health. When fighting hate with more hate, it also doesn't make the person change, and it just continues to grow and grow in my heart and thoughts like a poison spreading, and it makes them want to lash out more. Many people who actively choose to harm are in constant fight-or-flight survival mode, and anything that feels like an attack is immediately met with a defense mechanism to further preserve their fragile sense of self. It is useless and often causes more harm to ourselves to fight and argue with people who engage in abuse, as it tends to escalate the perpetrator and further their defense mechanisms and coercive control dynamics. Acting out of love for other people may also not cause them to change, but it changes us, and can keep us safer from harm.

People may hurt us and we may respond with gentleness, and they may still be rude. We cannot change the outcome of how others respond, but we can go to sleep at night knowing we acted according to integrity and our values. One way to love ourselves is to walk in integrity by honoring our values as it helps with our mental health and sense of purpose. When we do not act according to our values, it can be harmful to us and our sense of self.

If you don't want to do this that is okay, but what I want to do now is take a couple of minutes to recall a person who is more difficult for you to love. I want you to think of why this person is hard for you to love. As we sit in silence for a couple of minutes, I want you to do a body scan and notice what is coming up in your body. Do you notice any tension anywhere? How is your breathing and heart rate?

Now what I want you to do is extend some type of loving kindness towards this person. Imagine sending them compassionate thoughts, pray for them,

or whatever comes up to you. As you take a moment to do so, I want you to notice if there are any shifts in your body and in your thoughts.

Actively choosing not to ruminate and saturate ourselves in hate is an act of self-love. You may have heard the quote from Marianne Williamson: “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

Recalling and ruminating on why we can’t stand someone can increase our cortisol levels. Research finds that having chronic stress and cortisol can lead to many diseases and mental health issues, and can result in a lowered life expectancy. Choosing to love our enemies and hold them in the Light can be an act of loving and caring for ourselves.

Loving your neighbor is an act of loving yourself, and loving yourself makes it easier to love your neighbor. When we love ourselves and are secure with ourselves, it helps us to buffer the pain of rejection and harm from other people. It helps us to show up for ourselves and others and love in healthier ways.

In some circles it is taught that loving yourself is sinful. Self-love at the point of putting ourselves ABOVE others is the opposite of what Jesus taught. But let us not forget that the commandment is this: “Love your neighbor AS yourself”. It is not “Love your neighbor, not yourself.”

Matthew 10:29-31 says “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

God sees us as valuable, and therefore, we should see ourselves as valuable. For some, it is easier to love other people, or give more grace and compassion to others than themselves. A technique I often use in therapy when people who are hard on themselves is asking people “what would you say to a friend if they were going through this?” How would we talk to our friends, our neighbors, our child, self? If we love ourselves as we love our neighbors, do we need more self-compassion? Do we need to have gentle answers towards ourselves? Quakers believe in equality. Do we need to see ourselves as equals and not inferiors?

As we go into this time of reflection, I would like us to reflect on what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. What are ways that you can demonstrate love for yourself and for others?