



When I came here, one of the things that Daniel asked was that I should be prepared to tell our folks about what living their life in Dallas means by being able to talk about their faith with people at the gas pump, say, the gas pump faith. And so one of the reasons we chose this gospel message today from Matthew is that this is the message from the revised lectionary, the revised common lectionary that virtually every Christian church will be dealing with today around the globe. I just wanted you to understand that's where we started. And when I knew it was about being a neighbor, and since I came to you from Hawaii, I thought of the story that they often tell in Hawaii around this very question. There was a woman who moved to a new neighborhood with her two children, and she went into her house and across the street was a neighbor who'd been in the neighborhood for a long time.

And he was excited to see this new neighbor and these new children playing outside. Now, the national sport of Hawaii, and many believe it is still its own nation, it's another story, another sermon, but the national sport of Hawaii is volleyball. And out front of this new neighbor's yard, these two kids were playing volleyball. So they'd be bumping and setting and the ball was going up higher with every volley. And the neighbor across the street who watched this family move in became stricken with fear because as every time the ball went higher, the children were paying less and less attention to the road. Now, one of the great adventure sports in Hawaii is driving in Hawaii. Trust me.

And so this neighbor knew how dangerous it was to see the ball go up higher and higher and the children paying less and less attention to the road. And with every volley getting closer to the road and this neighbor's anxiety is rising and rising in his chest, he's wondering where this mother is. Why isn't she watching these children? It's higher and higher and closer to the road as a car whizzes by and the neighbor is now terrified, and out of a sense of fear and anxiety, he leaps from his house, goes across the street, checks both ways first, goes across the street, raps on the door

of his new neighbor and says, "Ma'am, your children are out here. They're right by the road. It's very dangerous." And the look of shock on her face at this news, she storms to the door, opens it wide. He steps aside to let her have it, let the children have it. Instead though, she turns on her heel and says, "You're their neighbor. You should be watching them." Yeah. Take that.

In our text today, we talk about neighbors. Jesus talks about neighbors. He's in the temple, Jesus, in Jerusalem, and He's doing a little teaching. He's speaking with some people who are challenging Him, who are testing Him and asking questions about God's will and God's power in the world. And the people asking first are the Sadducees. Now, the Sadducees are learned lay people. They really know their Bible. They really know their Torah. They're like your faith forward teachers though. They're not the ministers. They're tough to stump though. But the Pharisees are a little different. The Pharisees are sort of the temple elite. They don't just know their scripture. They don't just know the Torah. They make their living on making sure everything's going well in the temple. They're the priestly authorities. And when they hear that the really smart lay people have been stumped or having trouble with Jesus, they start in on Him too, the Pharisees.

And the first one to ask a question, in our translation, it says someone who knows the law, but in other translations and in the Greek, what they're really saying is a lawyer. This is a Pharisee who's also a lawyer. How awful to have a minister who would also be a lawyer. You are only asking for trouble. Now, I should say that there was a brand new person in the first service who was a lawyer and did not know I was a lawyer, and she was slightly offended by this. So just so you know, I am a lawyer. I can make this joke. Oh, gosh. I'm going to get letters. And so they send this one after them. I think even back then, Matthew knew his audience. So a lawyer asked Jesus, "What's the greatest commandment?" And He says, "To love your Lord God with all your heart and your soul and your mind. And the second is you shall love your neighbor as yourself on these hang all the rest of the law," meaning all the commandments.

Now, there's a lot of talk in many Christian circles that at this moment, Jesus teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, He sort of said or created a new thing that this innovation in the Christian faith is what happened, but that's really not true. Love your God with all your heart, your soul and your mind is a direct quote from Deuteronomy. To love your neighbor as yourself is a direct quote from that love letter to all of humanity, Leviticus. Yeah. I just wanted to hear who the Bible nerds were out there. So the quote isn't new at all. It's a concept even that isn't new. Not too long before this gospel was actually written, the famous rabbi Hillel retold the story about a Gentile asking him to summarize the Torah. And Hillel said essentially the same thing. Of course, this comes from one of the foundational prayers of all of Judaism, the Shema.

And so this story, when you look at it, is a formation that is so well known in it that it's actually turning Hillel's story around on itself. This story is much less about what one religious leader knew and much, much more about what self-proclaimed religious leaders have forgotten. Do you know any self-proclaimed political or religious leaders who may have forgotten this message? I'm just asking hypotheticals here.

But most illustrative, more than the forgetting and the remembering is I think in the original Greek we have in this text, the Greek world was known, very well known for talking a lot about love, maybe more than they should have, but they had so many different words for it, different kinds of

love about different kinds of people. And usually they'd use different words for the love of the divine, the love of God or this divine presence, and love of man or your fellow humans. But in this text, the author uses the same word. It's the exact same word for loving God and then turning and loving your neighbor in that form of love, agapais, which is the highest and noblest form of love. Thomas Aquinas actually called it to will the good of the other. So Jesus, when you look at this, is reminding the people who claim to be the most religious, who stake their futures, their careers, their livelihoods on this to practice the same love for the other as God does for them by willing the good of the other who is also our neighbor. The other is also our neighbor.

I heard a story once where someone was going door to door and just asking people if they were saved. I don't know if that's happened to anyone here in Dallas or somewhere else you lived or grew up. It happens where I live. It's fun. So she knocked on one door, said, "Hi." Person inside came to the door and she said, "Yes, I'm Christian. I go to church. I know that Jesus is the Lord, the light and the resurrection. I'm saved. Thank God." And she moved on, knocked on the second door. The person inside was a member of this church, of First Unitarian, and the person knocking on the door immediately burst into flames.

Wait, no, no, that says they... Sorry. I need glasses. Says they had way too much coffee and kept talking about nothing in particular. Let's go. And then she knocked on a third door, knocked on the door and said, "Are you saved? Are you a Christian, ma'am?" The woman inside thought for a second and said, "Well, you're going to have to ask my neighbors. I can't really tell you that." Yeah. I believe Jimmy Carter used to tell that story. And upon this, truly really hang all the laws of God and man. But what does this all mean for us today?

It matters where Jesus was when He was saying these things. He was in the temple in Jerusalem, speaking with the people who controlled the fate of that place, all the power in that place and who would eventually seal His own fate. But most scholars agree that the author of Matthew, when he was writing this, was well aware or maybe even had witnessed the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He knew that it was already destroyed. See, the Romans had left Jerusalem alone more or less, the Pharisees to run it until 70, the year 70, when the Romans came to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and it was never rebuilt. So Jerusalem literally means city of peace, but the Hebrew for Jeru, Jerusalem, we heard shalom today from our young voices, same idea, peace. But the root for Jeru is ear or yarah, which means vision or foundation.

It goes deeper. It's more imaginative than a simple city. Jerusalem means a vision for or a foundation of peace. And I know on so many hearts right now is the tragic circumstance of a city whose name means vision or foundation of peace is divided by laws where our guides in different regions, in tour groups, in buses need to change drivers just to pass from the east to the west or the west to the east because of the driver's ethnicity or religion, the city divided.

And that place name for peace we know also is a center of a conflict of unyielding assaults by governments, by citizens, and so tragically recently, by neighbors against neighbors. It makes hope seem very far, I know, for very many to hold this so often. Breaks, breaks, breaks the heart. And I think at times it breaks the heart of God too. But the commandment is to love with all our heart, even when it's broken, and our mind and our soul. And so with that broken heart, I say this

too, that beyond any cracking broken heart, there is still the deep soul of this world. There is the mind with enough energy left to dream that can see a way forward.

Stafford says in his poem, a poem whose title is an instruction, a ritual to read to each other, for it is important that awake people be awake for a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep. The signals we give, yes, no, or maybe, should be clear the darkness around us is deep. We church together have traced a line this whole month. We started this series with the question of truth. What is real? What is truth? We talked about healing and then we talked about reconciliation last week, truth, healing, reconciliation. And so today we look at transformation.

And so like the Stafford poem suggests, we should be clear. Transformation is not only possible, it is at the core of who we are. It is the future we all share, the fate of every neighbor we have on earth. It's the posture of a faith that concerns itself with its neighbors truly with the same measure of devotion that it concerns itself with the divine source that will always be transforming, will always be seeking the next path, will always be seeking the new way. In fact, the way was what the earliest people in the Christian movement called themselves. Before there was any word for being Christian, it was just the way. "Are you a member of the way?" But this way is not new as we've talked about. Loving God, loving others was something so commonly said and then so rarely lived then as it is today.

The laws of human decency, the way we care for one another, the standard we reach for goes back to ancient Jewish teaching. It goes farther back to Greek civilizations, reaching even into the most ancient religions and to the world probably before religion where around a campfire that warmed us, the ways we stayed alive by willing the good of the other and not only the self as we stood together to stake out light in the deepest, darkest times around us. The way, the path isn't a new thing. The way, the path doesn't change. The way, the path changes us. That's how it works. It changes us when we think about how resources maybe are shared in a divided city and that whether we will accept as true and as part of our city that some people will not have enough decent food, clean water or safe places to live.

Will we accept this? It changes us when we look out for the children or the kids in our midst and decide whether access to things that are dangerous for them like firearms or social media and other health risks, if those are acceptable or if they're not, we get to choose. The way of willing the good of the other changes us when we will not accept the status quo, when we will not wait for the world to simply change, when we say that there is a better way to make of this place a way, to make of our lives a new vision and a new foundation of peace.

Someone here I know may be thinking, "What does it matter what I do? What can one person do to make all this change?" Well, the reading we heard today from William Stafford, one of his most famous poems, Stafford published his first book of poems actually when he was almost 50. It took him a little while to get his thoughts together, but he took the life he had. He took what he had learned. It took the path of his life for him to realize that he had something he could share, that he could make a new thing in life and he is not alone. The actor and activist and ecologist, I'm sorry, the author, activist and ecologist Bill McKibben was standing right where I am standing right now on Wednesday. He did not need the booster seat I'm standing on. He's a tall man.

And he was here to talk about something he calls the third act where he reaches out to people 60 and over. All are welcome, but he focuses on people 60 and over who are yearning for something new and effective in their lives that benefit them, that can help them partner with movements that can make change for the generations to come. He told one story about some young people that wanted to protest the use of fossil fuels and so they got together and they needed some folks to back them up. And so at the front of the line were a bunch of kids marching and talking about ending fossil fuels and right behind them were some senior citizens carrying signs that said, "Fossils against fossil fuel."

Oh man, that's too good. But these ways that we start to enlighten the darkness around us, these new flames help each of us to point the way because the darkness around us is deep. But I don't believe that the poet is saying that means there are menacing dark forces all around us trying to get us. That's another kind of theology. That is not mine. I think it means that around us are opportunities that we have yet to see, places maybe where there are ideas growing, things that we haven't seen, that we don't know, that we haven't traversed yet, but hand in hand, arm in arm, dream and blessed dream, united in a line, we lift our vision. We see what is possible around us by lighting these new fires along the way.

And it's that line, the only line there really is through history passed from one life with its one breath to our lives this day, to you and to me and to this church to call out into this deeper darkness, to your neighbors in danger, getting too close to the street, to others assailed for their religious beliefs in this area and around the country and around the world for people discovering perhaps and expressing for the first time who they really are, who they love, who they want to be in this world, to be in a place that calls out in that danger to each and all of us and says, "No, you are an essential part of this church. You are a needed part in this life."

There are no throwaway people in this world. You are transforming us all. And that transformation though can only ever start with me, can only ever start with you, because no person on earth can change any other person. Just ask anyone who's tried. That is why the ancient and enduring wisdom is always to recognize and love the divine purpose around us, whatever that may be, that will be guiding your lives and then to take that same recognition of love and do the good for those around us with the same love and the same devotion and the same gratitude with which we draw every single breath, not because it will change them, because it's going to change you. In this way, united through time by those who willed the good for us that we hold tight to one another now through the deep and unknowable days to come and nights ahead to make this place, this community, this faith one where change is possible, renewal is promised and transformation can make in you, in me and in us all a brand new thing. May it ever be so, blessed be, and amen.