

“Another Sermon on Love”
John 13:31-35

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I have a sermon writing ritual each week that starts and ends with pie. On Thursday afternoons I log out of email, leave the office, go down the street to the Grand Traverse Pie Company where I buy an unsweetened iced tea and a slice of pie. I do not have a favorite kind of pie. After six years of sermon writing at the Pie Co I have tried every flavor they have on offer. I sit down at a table with my iced tea and my slice of pie and I write. Throughout the afternoon I'll plow through up after cup of the iced tea but I savor the pie by taking bites only when I am stuck and need a moment to think. It is an art to have the final forkful of pie as a victory bite when my writing is finished for the day.

I have tried other coffee shops in town and they are great for other purposes, but the Pie Co is my writing home. It's never too busy and usually other patrons keep their conversations to a hum in the background, creating the right kind of white noise and focused quiet.

This week, in the midst of my writing session and a slice of chocolate cream pie, two men sat down at the table next to mine. Their voices cut through the background. It wasn't their tenor so much as the content of their conversation. I could quickly tell that this was a conversation between a fellow pastor and his church member. What immediately stood out to me was that I didn't know this pastor. That might not seem notable for many of you, but let me give you some background.

Pastors are collegial by nature - we are always seeking out other pastors and clergy. We look to each other for support because often we are the only ones in our congregations who hold our role. It's unique, sometimes lonely work and we lean on each other for guidance, wisdom, and community. I'm a part of a local clergy group, the Interfaith Clergy Association, because each of us recognizes that we are better pastors and rabbis and priests and imams because we know each other and are in relationship together.

There are other local pastors who are not in the Interfaith Association and have their own clergy group that only has Christian clergy men on their membership roster. I don't know very many of these pastors because whenever I have had the occasion to meet them - through mutual friends, at a community event, in the neighborhood - there is an exchange that happens where I get really giddy when I learn they are pastor and when I say, "I am a local church Pastor, too!" ... They don't get giddy... Usually their eyes gloss over or they shift from foot to foot and the spark of connection is extinguished as we both excuse ourselves or change the topic of conversation.

What I am reminded of in those encounters is that for some of my colleagues, I do not count because I am a woman or I do not count because I am queer and I definitely don't count as a queer woman pastor. Every time this happens I am reminded that I am in the minority, that progressive Christians are in the minority, and that no matter how many inclusive, affirming spaces I create for myself in my life and in my ministry, there will always be spaces I am not welcome and there will always be people who count me out. It doesn't matter that I deeply believe they are wrong and I am right - every time it happens I feel the sting of rejection.

Which is why when a male pastor sat down at the table next to mine and I did not know who he was, I was very irritated. I didn't have to introduce myself to him to feel that old pang of

rejection coursing through my veins when what I wanted was divine inspiration. Every time he spoke I was reminded of our different beliefs and my irritation grew. There I was trying to find something to write about Jesus's commandment to love on another when all I could do was silently critique every bit of pastoral advice he was offering his church member. There is no time for love when clearly I was being sent on a mission of self-righteousness!!

It took me three bites of pie before I realized this was exactly why we needed another sermon on love. The hardest love is when you are in the minority and are being asked to love an individual or a group that is in the majority. More specifically, it is hard to offer love when someone holds power over you and uses that power to harm you. Now the pastor at the Pie Co did not have direct power over me, but he works for an institution that has plenty of power over LGBTQ+ people and women and children, some of which is directly harmful and the source of religious trauma. That individual symbolized a larger divide in our community, a past hurt that I had experienced, and I wasn't so much mad at that one person as I was at every person similar to him that had come before him.

Love is not always one-on-one, person to person. We understand that power is about more than one individual person, it is institutionalized and symbolic - so is love. When we talk about love we talk about a commitment to act certain ways, we talk about behaviors that require us to show up in certain spaces or create more room in spaces that we are already in - this is not just about one person. This is systemic love.

When we feel called to show up in places of power on the side of love, whether we are part of a minority or showing up on behalf of a group has been harmed, we often start where I did at the Pie Company. We start with anger. We start with contempt. We show up ready to pick

apart and analyze and scoff at those who wield power. That can certainly be cathartic, or can make me feel more powerful by cutting someone else down to size. Perhaps there is a role for that, but I don't believe that is what we mean when we talk about showing up in love.

In situations of injustice or oppression, in situations and issues where someone's power is harming a group of people, showing up in love requires us to first turn toward the ones who are being harmed. To listen to how they have been harmed, to listen to what they need, and to then act in those places of power with them. Love does not fixate on what it hates - it nurtures what is in need of life or support or compassion.

For the last few weeks abortion rights have been central in our national discourse. I know that abortion is a topic that even within our one congregation there are many nuanced views. I have been profoundly shaped by the United Church of Christ's reproductive justice commitments, by the belief that if I trust women, it means trusting them to make the right decisions for their bodies and their lives, including with decisions about abortions.

It took me a long time to say that comfortably because so much of the debate around abortion is about focusing on what you don't believe - not about examining the depths of what you do believe. It is about vilifying the other side, creating space between who is right and who is wrong and ensuring there is no confusion that you would never be confused for one of them, whoever the them happens to be.

So when a Supreme Court opinion is leaked, we spend our time vilifying the justices that wrote the opinion, picking apart their arguments, putting down their logic, and feeling very self righteous even as we raged and grieved. Again, very cathartic. Anger is a part of the way we experience grief for a reason but we also have to turn from that anger toward love.

When reproductive rights are threatened, love means turning toward those who will be most impacted, which is anyone with a uterus who is of reproductive age, especially those who have the most limited access to medical care or without financial resources to seek private medical care. It means working to ensure that even as power works against them, there are networks in their local communities creating safe healthcare with options that serve all women. It means organizing on a state level to overturn laws that harm women. It means working to create a reality where women are able to start or continue having children on their own terms and in ways that ensure their own physical and emotional safety.

I wasn't reminded of what this kind of love looks like until a week and a half ago when I went to a rally at the state capitol. I went because I was angry. I did not go for love. I went because I wanted to yell at someone and every good rally has yelling, we just call it chants. I had been stuck reading news story after news story in the 24 hours following the Supreme Court leak and I needed something to *do* to get out my anger.

At the rally, slowly the steps to the capitol filled up and spilled out onto the lawn. Over 300 people gathered. At 38 years old, I was one of the oldest people there. The majority of the people were young adults - many college students who were in the midst of finals - multiple gender expressions and racial diversity and physical abilities - but almost all surely to be included in the group that will be most impacted when *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. Standing amongst this crowd, listening to their cries, my anger melted. I thought that going to a rally would be my outlet, but instead it reminded me that the work of love was just beginning. This is not another generation's fight to take up. This is not for someone else to advocate for. This is not their problem to solve.

Creating a community, a state, and a nation that protects women, that believes women, that trust women, will take everyone to show up in love. Our hatred and our anger is exhausting. It wears us down. Turning toward those we love - whether it is refugees or LGTQ+ youth or folks living in poverty - does something else. It empowers us. It activates and engages us. It sustains our courage and actions.

One of my favorite parts of belonging to Edgewood is our intergenerational relationships. In this place I have gotten to learn from activists who have been advocating on the same issues for longer than I have been alive. Sometimes there is weariness, but there is also a commitment that runs deeper and stronger than any amount of anger or fear. Those activists among us who persist in their work - every single time it is because they are fueled by love. They have built relationships with people who are impacted by an injustice, and a desire to make it right with and for them is what keeps them going. Love keeps them showing up. Love keeps them finding a way when the way seems impossible.

So what did love look like when I was listening in on the conversation that irked me so much at the Pie Co? Maybe love was not scowling directly at them. (Probably not...) Maybe love was admitting my desire that we could be united in our ministries instead of separated by a wall of prejudice or pride. Maybe self-love or love for my LGBTQ+ community was the voice that reminded me we need to put a Pride Sunday worship service on the calendar and broadcast it far and wide, to make sure that if there are any queer folks longing for a spiritual home, they know they will be welcomed here.

Jesus' commandment was for us to love one another. We often quote the passage from 1 Corinthians that explains what this love calls for at weddings, narrowing our ideas of love to our

intimate relationships. But what does love look like in the call to justice? What does love look like in the face of systems of oppression or institutions of injustice?

That love is patient. It is kind. It does not envy or boast, it is not proud. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices when there is truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and love always perseveres. 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4-8. This is our commandment. When we feel our anger start to rise up or wear us down, that is our nudge to orient ourselves toward love, back toward God who asks again and again for us to care for each other, to nurture each other, to protect each other, to love one another, every single other. May it be so.