

"Radical Love"

John 13:34-35

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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A: Good morning everyone! My name is Lauren Flora. I am one of the Assistant Workcamp Coordinators serving through BVS this year. I am from the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren in Bridgewater, VA and I am so grateful for the opportunity to be here with you all today.

B: And I am Marissa Witkovsky-Eldred - also in Brethren Volunteer Service in the same position of assistant workcamp coordinator. I grew up in the Roaring Spring First Church of the Brethren in Middle Pennsylvania and as Lauren said, we are happy to be here with you this Sunday.

A: As we were thinking about what we wanted to share with you this morning in keeping with the theme of "what it means to be the church in the 21st century", we were looking at the calendar and realized Valentine's Day is coming up which means friendship and love and happiness...

B: And chocolate and candy and desserts...you know that we like our sweets and snacks in the BVS office.

A: Yes, but a sermon about food and chocolate didn't seem to fit that theme as well, so we decided love was probably the best way to go. But, not just any love, we think the church of the 21st century should be focusing on radical love.

B: Love is a big topic and love carries with it a lot of shades of meaning in the English language. If I say I love chocolate and then I tell you I love my mom, it is the same word, but you would understand that those are not the same types of love. However, in the Greek language love is very clear - there are 4 different words that would translate as love, but these Greek words carry specific meanings.

For example, "FILL-ee-ah". Being from Pennsylvania, I have of course heard of Philadelphia being known as the city of "brotherly love". It is known this way because the word Philadelphia is derived from "FILL-ee-ah". "FILL-ee-ah" is a love that friends would have for one another. It means to have affection for. It is something that most human beings experience often in their lives.

A: But that's not radical love.

I've heard of the Greek word "store gay". That type of love seems pretty powerful... I mean it is a strong type of love that represents the connections between family members. I don't think it's in the Bible, but it describes a familial type of love... like one between a mother and her child.

B: But that isn't radical love either. Most people who have ever had children experience this type of love, so it is a common feeling and nothing out of the ordinary.

How about "eros" - the third Greek word for love. "Eros" is a romantic, passionate type of love... That for sure has the potential to be radical.

A: You're right, that can be a strong type of love, but I wouldn't necessarily call it radical. I mean it's in movies and books all the time and it comes and goes in people on a regular basis... and it's associated with Valentine's Day...

I got it! It has to be "agape" love - there is a Sunday school class in the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren called "agape"... PLUS I've seen it in the Bible!

In Greek, "agape" means an unconditional, selfless love like God has for us. This is the love that God wants us to have for others. That HAS to be radical love.

B: Yeah you're right. I guess we did pick that verse for today. John 13:34-35 says, "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples - when they see the love you have for each other." In Greek, the word used in this passage is agape. That is a radical love.

A: And, it is not a suggestion, it is a command. Jesus says "Let me give you a new command: love one another."

B: Okay, so we can understand that Jesus wants us to love this way, but practically speaking, how do we do that?

A: Well, radical love is not a feeling that we feel or something done in response to an emotion we have. Radical love is a choice we make through the actions that we take. It makes me think of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I think that has a lot of specific examples that we can look at to help understand what radical love is.

B: Yeah, I agree. So let's look at Matthew 5-7. These verses in Matthew are known as the Sermon on the Mount because in Matthew 5:1, it says that "Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down...and he began to teach." All the following words in

Matthew 5-7 were given in that message by Jesus and this sermon has become a central teaching for many in the Church of the Brethren and other Christian denominations. So, what can we learn from this sermon about radical love?

A: In Matthew 5:38-42, we read that a radical love chooses to RESPOND TO EVIL PEACEFULLY. The Message version says, "Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life."

In 2011 three women from Africa and the Arab world were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in acknowledgement of their nonviolent role in promoting peace, democracy, and gender equality. One of these women was the peace activist Leymah Gbowee (bow-ee).

Leymah had a normal childhood and had just graduated from high school and was headed to attend a university when the First Liberian Civil War broke out and catapulted the country into a period of uncertainty and violence. She eventually fled to Ghana in 2001 to earn a degree and while there she became involved with peace activists. By 2002 she was a leading member of the Women in Peacebuilding Program and the West African Network for Peacebuilding.

But what Leymah is best known for is leading a nonviolent movement that brought together Christian and Muslim women to play a pivotal role in ending Liberia's devastating, fourteen-year civil war in 2003.

She led the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace participants in public protests that forced Liberia's ruthless then-President Charles Taylor to meet with them and agree to take part in formal peace talks in Ghana. At a crucial moment when the talks seemed stalled, Leymah and nearly 200 women formed a human barricade to prevent Taylor's representatives and the rebel warlords from until the men reached a peace agreement.

Leymah watched this war, and saw firsthand, the violence surrounding her community throughout her teenage years and as an early mother. She watched this war claim hundreds of thousands of lives and displace millions of others into refugee camps. But her response was to lead a peace movement. To bring in hundreds of women to ensure that their country would be safe and at peace.

Leymah said in her speech "we succeeded because there is no way in this world where someone would give you a slap and you slap them back and expect that it's settled. Violence has never settled peace... the opinions of a Muslim women was no different than the

opinions of a Christian women. And when that message finally sunk there was no turning back."

When the pain runs deep and there is that part of you that wants to see that person hurt like you hurt don't throw it back at them, even if that's your first instinct.

As Christians, Christ has called us to a higher standard. Jesus said, you have heard it said, Love your neighbor and hate you enemy, but I say unto you, love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you.

When leymah accepted her Nobel Peace Prize she said "We cannot build our country or any country in the world without peace" These women with the leadership of Leymah responded peacefully to wars and turned Liberia from a country that used to be remembered for children soldiers to one that is now remembered for the white t-shirt women. A sign of peace.

When we chose to respond to evil peacefully we have the chance to show God to those who are hateful and allow him to enter their lives. By responding peacefully we open up the opportunity for them to see there are other ways and hope for a future filled with peace.

B: A radical love chooses to FORGIVE WRONGS FREELY. Matthew 6:14-15 says, "If you forgive those who act against you, God will forgive you also. But if you refuse to forgive others, God will not forgive you."

So, building on Jesus' words to act and respond peacefully to evil, it is also our goal as followers of Christ to forgive those who act against us.

Of course that sounds like a great concept, but in reality, it is very challenging. How do we forgive when we have experienced deep pain due to someone else's actions? How do we forgive when someone has taken so much from us? How do we forgive when it just hurts?

In early 2009, an 11 year old girl wrote a blog about her life during the Taliban occupation of her region of Pakistan. The following summer, an American journalist made a New York Times documentary about her experiences. She quickly rose in prominence after this documentary, giving interviews in print, speaking on television, and receiving the nomination for the International Children's Peace Prize.

On October 9, 2012, this girl - while on a bus in her hometown after taking an exam - was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman in an assassination attempt that was retaliation for her activism and what he deemed appropriate as a punishment for her "crime" of being a woman working toward an education.

This story belongs to Malala YOU-SHUFF-PSI. Many of us have heard her name and know that her story sparked an international outpouring of support. Malala survived the attack and has become a prominent activist for the right to education. She has been featured as one of Time magazine's most influential people and that she earned the Nobel Peace Prize at age 17 - the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate.

But, do you know how Malala reacted to the antagonist in her story - to the man that chose fear and evil and violence and hate?

When speaking at the United Nations in 2013, Malala said that she knew her life was threatened long before the attack and that she had often wondered what she would do if faced by a man with a gun. She said that she remembered thinking this to herself:

"If he comes to kill me, what do you do, Malala? I thought I would take my shoe and hit him. Then I thought, 'if you hit a man with a shoe, you would be no different to the Talib. You must not treat others with that much cruelty and that much harshly.'"

She continued, by saying: "I do not even hate the Talib who shot me. Even if there is a gun in my hand and he stands in front of me, I would not shoot him. This is the compassion that I have learnt from Muhammad the Prophet of Mercy, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha... And this is the forgiveness that I have learnt from my mother and father."

Those are powerful words. And they are deeply rooted in Malala's beliefs and her conviction that grace, peace, and forgiveness are from God and are the only choice.

Forgiveness is not weakness - it is real courage. Malala's actions freed her to go forward and continue her vision of education for all, including for the family of her attacker. She did not say that there should not be consequences for the evil actions of her attacker, but she chose to open relationships, move forward, and do good when she chose to forgive.

She followed Jesus' example on the cross when he speaks these words in Luke, "God, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

When we FORGIVE WRONGS FREELY, we open ourselves to experiencing God's forgiveness in even greater ways.

A: A radical love chooses to VIEW OTHERS GRACIOUSLY. In Matthew 7:1-5 it says "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

In January 2009 Gregory Khalil and Todd Deatherage forged a most unlikely alliance. These two men met in 2004 and despite having very different starting points (Greg being partly Palestinian Christian ancestry and longtime democrat, and Todd an evangelical Christian and former Chief in Staff to a republican U.S. senator) they both discovered that they shared a common understanding of America's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They co-founded Telos - a group that envisions a world in which leaders and their communities claim the expertise and relationships to effectively and relentlessly wage peace. They imagine that their unique model of conflict transformation will be replicated elsewhere - helping bring stability, healing and reconciliation to communities around the world.

In ancient Greek, the word "telos" describes a unique purpose or goal that is rooted in a fundamental principle, towards which all intentions and energies are singularly focused. Their "telos" is the freedom, security and dignity of every human in the Holy Land. They encourage people to study, recognizing that effective conflict engagement requires a posture of continual learning: about history, culture, geography, and people. When they Speak, Give and serve they are standing with and supporting those who share their values, not necessarily their politics, skin color or religion.

They are starting conversations and building relationships. When we do things, our motives seem perfectly justifiable to us. When other's do things, especially if we have been hurt by it, we often apply motives that become intentional. This doesn't mean that we can never judge people's actions. This means we should withhold judgement of people's motives.

Try and apply better motives and trust that the Lord is the one who will judge the motives of men's hearts.

B: Finally, a radical love chooses to LIVE LIFE SACRIFICIALLY.

As we all know - either from textbooks or personal experience - September 11, 2001 was the day the World Trade Centers in New York were attacked. On this day, in the many moments of chaos and loss, the world saw first responders running into the chaos and loss instead of away from it.

Captain William Francis Burke, Jr. of the New York Fire Department arrived on the 27th floor of the South Tower and found two co-workers who had not evacuated because one was wheelchair-bound. In that moment as the tower began to collapse,

Burke ordered his team of firefighters to evacuate safely while he stayed behind to help. The three men only made it down to the 21st floor.

Richard Lopez of the New York Police Department responded to the call on 9/11 and spent hours in search and recovery efforts. Years later, he died of cancer that developed following his service at Ground Zero.

Still now, first responders continually choose sacrifice - both little things like time with their family on the holidays and big things like their health or life. Imagine what our life would look like if we had the same ideals - if every decision and every action was done sacrificially with others best interest in mind rather than our own.

A: So let me get this straight, a radical love chooses to RESPOND TO EVIL PEACEFULLY, FORGIVE WRONGS FREELY, VIEW OTHERS GRACIOUSLY, and LIVE LIFE SACRIFICIALLY.

B: Yeah. Wow, that's a lot of pressure. And those were some huge acts of living out radical love.

A: They are... But being the church of the 21st century that radically loves doesn't mean that you have to have such a powerful story to describe YOUR radical love. There are plenty of everyday things that you can do to begin your radical love journey. For example..... We can respond to evil peacefully every day by "being the bigger person." We don't need to get down on the same level. But instead we can respond nonaggressively and allow God to be seen by those who truly need his presence in their lives.

We can be like Leymah Gbowee and participate in peaceful protests in response to the evil in this world. We can choose to stand up for what we believe in in a peaceful manner, even if our hearts are hurting and we are being treated unfairly. Even when our natural instinct is to "get even" or send the hate back, being a church of the 21st century that seeks a peaceful response to evil requires us to take the evil and respond in a calm manner.

B: We can FORGIVE WRONGS FREELY every day when we choose radical love over anger or resentment. We can choose to forgive a neighbor when they spread a rumor about us. We can choose to forgive a co-worker when they make a decision based on what is best for themselves instead of what is best for the team. We can forgive a family member when they sell the family heirloom without asking.

Just like Malala YOU-SHUFF-PSI, we can freely forgive wrongs by leaning on God and the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. It is impossible to forgive others like Christ did if we do not rely on the Spirit in each of us to give the strength needed to selflessly forgive even when our hearts are screaming at us not to. Even if the

natural tendency of our hearts is to shut out forgiveness, being a church of the 21st century that wants to love radically requires us to open up and forgive.

We can also choose every day to VIEW OTHERS GRACIOUSLY. I recently went to Knoxville, TN on a visit for one of our workcamps this summer that will be focusing on homelessness. When I think about homelessness, I often think of the idea of VIEWING OTHERS GRACIOUSLY. Although there are many individuals and organizations that pour out love and support to the homeless community, I think that a large number of people (including myself) have the tendency to pass some type of judgement on those that are homeless.

Maybe that judgement comes when you think "why aren't they trying harder to find a job - there are plenty of jobs available and they are just too lazy to try or too picky".

Maybe that judgement is assuming that someone is homeless because of drugs or alcohol.

Maybe that judgement is a general "looking down upon" because they are in your way or bother you.

A lot of the time these judgements are just not true and come from a place of discomfort or fear of "otherness". Or maybe some of the judgements are true... But so what - it doesn't really matter.

What matters is that you are judging someone else and making a determination about them or their motives without the authority to do so and without knowing anything about their life. Instead of instantly thinking those judgements, we as a radically loving church should strive to change our natural tendencies and choose to form thoughts that harbor grace - the kind of grace that we constantly receive from God. Instead of judging, think about what you can do to give grace. Can you buy someone new clothes so that they can attend an interview? Can you give someone \$5 and just trust that it will be meeting a need - no matter what that need is? Let God do the judging and you do the helping and empowering and loving in gracious new ways that challenge you to grow.

A: And finally, WE think a great way to live life sacrificially is to serve through BVS. In BVS, you may not have a lot of money or be living the life you expect, but those sacrifices are worth it. You can make a positive impact on all kinds of people (and yourself) by choosing to spend a year without the comforts you are used to. You are never too old - anyone over 18 can serve and there are a variety of projects that can use your many

talents. Joining BVS and trying out all these other options of radical love are the perfect way to live out Jesus' command to love one another in John 13.

B: So... I think we need to make a promise to think deeper about radical love. I think we should all make a Valentine's Day resolution.

A: A what? I only make resolutions for News Years....

B: Yeah, but most people have already stopped following those resolutions. SO, let's make a Valentine's resolution - one that we will actually keep and that really matters.

A: Okay, I'm in! Are you? What will be YOUR first resolution to start loving radically?