



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Sixth Sunday of Easter: May 26, 2019

Sermon Title: "No exceptions."

Gospel Text: John 5:1-9

Last Sunday, our Gospel reading was a repeat of what we heard during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday. It was Jesus at the Last Supper giving a new commandment to his disciples – a commandment to “love one another.” We’ve all heard it a million times. We *know* Jesus calls us to love one another. But come on... Aren’t there *some* exceptions?

In answer to that question, John’s Gospel presents this very curious little reading to us today. It’s one we rarely hear. You see, today’s Gospel is an *optional* reading for the sixth Sunday of Easter in Year C. So at best we wrestle with this reading once every three years, but because it’s an *optional* lesson, it’s possible you’ve *never* heard this reading before in Sunday worship. That’s a shame, because it’s a really interesting lesson that gives us a lot to think about.

On the surface, the story is pretty simple. Jesus is in Jerusalem for a religious festival. It’s the Sabbath, and near the temple, at a pool people believe has healing properties, Jesus encounters a man who has been afflicted with some sort of illness for 38 years. Who knows how long the man has been waiting at this healing pool. It sounds like a long time: months, years, or maybe even decades, and the man seems to have all sorts of excuses why he has been waiting and waiting and doing nothing. Nevertheless, Jesus commands the man to get up, and miraculously, he does. Now, we’re used to reading stories about Jesus healing people, and so, frankly, this little story doesn’t seem all that remarkable, right?

But let’s dig in a little deeper, while we keep this “love one another” commandment in the back of our minds. Think about this man and all the reasons he might be a little “difficult” to love. First, he doesn’t seem to be investing much of his own effort into getting better. If we encountered someone like this, who has been sick for nearly four decades and seems to be taking zero initiative to get better, we might be inclined to think, “Hey, I’m not gonna help this guy! I’ll just be enabling this chronic dependency of his.” Maybe we’d even be so bold as to give him a little advice. “Hey there – you by the pool – stop waiting and begging. Haven’t you read in the Bible that God helps those who help themselves?” (By the way –that’s *not* in the Bible – it comes from an almanac Ben Franklin wrote.)

If that’s not enough to sour you on this guy, consider this... Did he express any *gratitude* to Jesus for this miraculous healing? No. Did he express *love* for Jesus, *faith* in Jesus, *tell others* about Jesus, or become an active *follower* of Jesus? No, no, no, and no. It gets worse. Read on in chapter five and you discover that when the religious authorities heard about this healing and questioned the man, he quickly threw Jesus under the proverbial bus. “It was Jesus who did this. Don’t blame me!” As a result, Jesus was accused of blasphemy (because he referred to God as

his father) and of breaking the law (because he healed the man on the Sabbath). As the saying goes, “no good deed goes unpunished!” (By the way, *that’s* not in the Bible either...)

We can come up with all sorts of reasons why *Jesus* shouldn’t love and bless this man, and why *we also* wouldn’t love and bless someone like him who *we* might encounter on the street. And yet this is the very man whom Jesus *does* love, bless, and heal. And in doing so, he reminds us that his command to love one another doesn’t offer us any easy outs.

Now, before we go any further, let me address the “thought bubbles” that are forming over your heads. No, this doesn’t require that we give people anything and everything they ask for. Jesus is telling us to love one another, not become vending machines. And I’m not advocating that we put ourselves in situations that are clearly dangerous. No one is asking you to put your life at risk. But Jesus *is* calling us to love others, and my guess is that none of *us* are extending his love nearly as widely as *he* does. Don’t take my word for it – just listen to the thoughts we all hear in our head as we approach a homeless person or a panhandler. And think about how we react to someone’s need when we know that person is never going to say “thank you,” or join the church, or do anything to love us or Jesus back. We all fall short. We all make exceptions.

And so who is Jesus placing in our pathway, so that we can extend his love, mercy, and blessing? After all, we surely are unworthy of Jesus’s love. Who are the other unworthy people whom Jesus *also* loves and whom Jesus is calling *us* to love? There are no exceptions.

With Memorial Day coming tomorrow, I’m reminded of a story which illustrates a bit of today’s Gospel. It involves a Lutheran pastor named Franklin Schantz. He was a Gettysburg Seminary graduate, and in late July 1863 he returned to his alma mater, just a few weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg. Even then the streets, fields, barns, homes, camps, and even churches overflowed with the critically injured and dying.

Pastor Schantz eventually made his way to the Lutheran Seminary – Old Dorm - where he had once lived and was taught the Gospel of Jesus. Now it was a field hospital filled with both Union and Confederate soldiers whose lives and bodies had been shattered by that brutal battle. The Surgeon in Chief asked Pastor Schantz to conduct a worship service for those soldiers. Here’s how he described that experience:

“At the appointed time for holding Service, I stood near the stairway in the second hall of the building. As the noise in the Surgeon’s room had not ended, I sent a messenger to inform the Surgeon that I was ready to begin the Service... Very soon after the messenger returned to me, the surgeon and his party came from the surgeon’s room and passed me on a rush down the stairway and out of the Building. I was glad the noise of the carousers had ceased. I conducted the Service and preached a Sermon, which the sick and wounded could hear in their rooms, as the doors were open. I preached to an audience which I did not see... No thought entered my mind when I was a student in the Seminary... that six years later I would stand where I stood in July, 1863, and preach a Sermon to sick and wounded soldiers occupying the same rooms which we had as our rooms in student years.”

Just imagine. There in the midst of a bloody Civil War, Pastor Schantz preached about Jesus's love by *embodying* that love. As he stood in a hallway and preached to an audience he could not see, he preached to soldiers both Union and Confederate. Abolitionists and defenders of slavery. Christians and atheists. The grateful and the ungrateful. The warmhearted and the hardhearted. Pastor Schantz didn't direct his words of hope and grace toward those who deserved to hear them, because if that was the case, he would've preached to an empty room. Following Jesus's example, he shared Jesus's love with everyone. No exceptions.

The great writer and theologian Thomas Merton perhaps expressed it best when he wrote, "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business."

So who is Jesus calling us to love? The deserving and undeserving. The grateful and the ungrateful. The kind and the unkind. The generous and the stingy. Believers and unbelievers. Our friends and our enemies. Jesus is calling us to love everyone. No exceptions. *Because that's how Jesus loves us.* Amen.