

Covenant Church Sermon, January 14, 2024

Mark Labberton

Well, what a joy indeed to be here. The Hendersons and the Labbertons go back many, many years. And they are for me what I call five-minute friends, which does not mean that we have a five-minute friendship. It means that after periods of time go by, it's as though we were just together five minutes ago, because there's a sort of connection that we've had over these years. It was true in the long-ago days and has been true throughout this weekend.

Again, just such a palpable sense of connection. It's a joy to be part of this congregation this morning and to acknowledge the significance of what you're about and the work that you're trying to live into of being people who not only know Jesus Christ but seek to actually follow him. Those are two different things and they don't necessarily always go together. It's part of what we're going to be thinking about. So thank you for your faithfulness.

Thank you for your desire to be light and salt in this town, in this region, and wherever it is that you may go in your work and in your life. The text that we're going to be looking at is a very challenging one. So I want to congratulate you on your courage not only to come out on a morning like this where, you know, every Californian would never even think of like moving outside the door. I just can't even really quite express it. I think negative five was like a metaphor to me or something. No, no, no, there's actually something called negative five and actually you can feel it. Got it. I got the message. It's really clear to me that that's really true. So I'm still kind of taking that in but that's really a truth.

So thank you for your courage in that way. But thank you for your courage in wanting to sing songs like the songs we've sung with words like "Make me like Jesus." That is not a glib phrase. That is a revolutionary act. That is a recreation of something that isn't otherwise going to be true. It's about a way different understanding of what it means to be human, to be a neighbor, to be a husband or a father or a spouse, to be a worker, to be somebody who lives in the world as light and salt.

This text is going to be more salt, way, way more salt, taken at its face value than we really want to receive because it calls us really to a frame and to an existence and to a set of

actions that are really meant to be transformative. They transform us and they transform those that we might touch.

A number of years ago I wrote a book called "The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor" and the danger of loving your neighbor is not the neighbor. The danger of loving your neighbor is that it's going to endanger our sense that life is simply about me. It's about my life. It's about what I want. It's about my perceptions. And to really actually love my neighbor, as we will see in this text so challengingly, is loving and learning to love beyond ourselves. That is a transformation of change. Though the text may be very familiar, the reality is one I hope we strain forward to together as we seek God's Word and voice today.

Let's pray. Lord, by your mercy you're a God who has not only acted but still acts, a God who is not only cosmically present but intimately present, a God who has spoken and now speaks in this text in ways that call us beyond ourselves. Lord, our culture is created to be all about ourselves. May we hear afresh however familiar these words may be. This call and then our willingness to live it. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Gospel of Matthew is a gospel that I think of as the gospel of surprise. It's a gospel surprise because in certain ways it's the most Jewish of the four gospels and it has the deepest kind of reflection on the Hebrew text. And it also is the text that is full of Jesus demonstrating again and again and again that he's just exactly not what people were all expecting him to be.

So there is an inversion that goes on and it starts in the chapter one with the genealogies and the names particularly for very unexpected women in a context whose names would never be included in that genealogy but who are there, there with all of their complicated histories and stories and yet they are there. It's like Matthew is saying right from the very beginning, are you listening? Do you actually hear what I'm saying? It's just exactly what it looks like you would think and then it just turns out the names aren't the names you would have expected.

The same thing happens in the birth narrative just immediately after the genealogy. All of the genealogy leads to Joseph and then the birth narrative has actually nothing to do with Joseph. It's like, wait, are you listening? Everything was the perfect setup for Joseph who is in

the line of David to actually be somehow the line through which Jesus would be born and he is but not at all in the way that would have been expected.

The same thing happens throughout all of the early chapters. You get eventually to the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven. The sermon is itself an act of surprise. It starts with God's blessing on these people that are described in all of their vulnerability, all of their neediness, all of their unguarded vulnerability. In the context of that, God is going to keep blessings. By the time we come through the Sermon on the Mount with all of its reordering of relationships in the world, our perception of ourselves and our neighbor and God, eventually we come to the end of the Sermon with a very familiar challenge where Jesus tells the story of the parable of the rock and the sand.

In the context of that, Jesus is bringing a sermon to a close with words that again, however familiar, are meant to actually be our primary call every day. Jesus says, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine," this sermon that I've just preached, "and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was its fall."

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowd was were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes. Jesus is not a preacher who at the end of the day wants to stand at the door and have people say, "Good sermon." Like don't speak that at the door. If you've heard me today, Jesus is saying, "I want you to live this story." Live these exhortations. Embody this faith. Walk in this way. Actually show up as though the gospel you've just heard was true. Live as though it's actually true that Jesus is calling us to this new way of kingdom living. It is an extraordinary invitation to a very different perception of ourselves, our neighbor, and God into a new kind of action which is meant to be performed in the world that we live in day by day by day.

The number one concern he has is that not only that you might just glibly say at the door, "Nice sermon," but that you will go away and actually forget that the point of the sermon was

a changed life. I remember years ago, early in my career as a pastor, where somebody told me that someone had spoken harshly about me in between two services, and the reason was that they said, "I just feel like he was telling us what to do." I said, "Yeah, I was actually. I think that's right. I think that was exactly what I was doing. I was trying to tell you what to do. That is, I will confess. That's true." Because that is actually what the text is actually calling us to do. So actually, do this, Jesus is saying. And yet, we all know that the number one critique of the church throughout millennia, not least in this exact era, is that the church fails to live out its identity.

This is the shipwreck where the church lands in the public view today. Not only in the United States, but also in many places around the world, where there's a sense the church professes a given thing and it just doesn't show up, and especially it doesn't show up at times where the where the hostilities and the challenges and the difficulties, the complexities of living this life out, are the most important. In a time when almost everyone would agree that there is incredible division in the life of the church and in the life of America.

Oh, that it were the case that the reputation of the church in a time like this was, yeah, all that division is all true, but it actually turns out that the church, those church people, like, oh my gosh, they're not walking that narrative. That's actually not how they're doing. And yet, the narrative is often that people in the name of Jesus are sometimes those that are professing the very division, which is the heartbreak of God in a time like this, when the church is racked by its own divisions. In this context, Jesus is saying, I want you to actually live like you act.

Max Dupree, who was that chair of Fuller's board for a number of years and head of the Herman Miller Company and just an absolutely remarkable man, had a granddaughter, Zoe, who was born weighing one pound, seven ounces, and there was really little chance at that time that she was going to live, she fortunately has lived, but at the time that that occurred, he rushed to the hospital to do anything he could, and head nurse said, Max, what you need to do is you need to come every day, and with the greatest gentleness, place your hands inside the incubator where Zoe is and tell her over and over and over again how much you love her, because what she needs more than anything else is to connect your voice to your touch.

Max uses this story to emphasize themes in leadership, but this morning I want to suggest it's just a witness to what Jesus is saying here at the end of Matthew 7. Don't just profess it, actually embody it. Be the people who live as though the gospel was actually true, and let it show up in unexpected, surprising ways wherever you live.

Now Jesus says this as a great exhortation, and we have to ask ourselves, where is the disconnect for us? Where are we in our life? We might be in middle school, we might be in high school, we might be in college, we might be somewhere in the middle of life, we might be toward the later years of life, whatever it might be, and in that whole range we are daily given an opportunity to learn what it means to practice being a Christian, to actually practice being an earnest follower, not just an earnest professor of faith, but an earnest embodiment of the reality of the kingdom of God in the world.

When I think about the places of tension, it often happens in subtle ways, in internal ways, places that cause us to be particularly protective, anxious, even fearful. I'm writing a book right now on fear, and one of the most fascinating things about fear is the way that it locks us in. It locks us into spaces, which if we could somehow find freedom, would give us the liberty to walk into the world in just an entirely different way. But if we walk into a middle school classroom or high school lab or wherever we might be, and we walk into those spaces, and really what's the narrative is that happening inside is really fear, which it was for me absolutely during middle school and high school, incredible fear, lots of external life that I live, but boy, the narrative inside me was a narrative of anxiety and fear.

Now I was good at masking it, but it nevertheless terrorized me from the inside out. By the grace of God, that degree of fear has completely changed. Why? Because I realized that Jesus came to set us actually free to move toward, often, the very people things that might fear, cause fear for us, and also to give us the liberty, when we're in that context, to actually put our eyes on the other person, the other reality, and away from ourselves.

If I'm locked into the world of Mark Labberton, bounded north, south, east, and west by Mark Laverton, that is a very tiny world. And if I feel like the whole nature of my life needs to be boundaried in this particular way, then how could I ever actually become a person who would

live the Sermon on the Mount? The Sermon that is calling us beyond ourselves, into a world where there's great need to be light and salt.

This is a text that calls us into that kind of salty life. Now without comment, the observer of this text, Matthew writes this, says, "Now all those who heard Jesus were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not like the scribes and Pharisees."

Authority in Matthew, that particular word in Greek, is a word that is used at critical points in Matthew's Gospel, over and over and over. It's about authority. What is the authority? The authority is the identity of Jesus. The authority is the connection in particular between what Jesus says and what he does. That brings authority.

I bet if we were to go through this room and do a little analysis of what stands out about certain people's characteristics, is that for people that have authority, they have it because they can profess or state something and then live in light of that reality. Their word is their deed. Jesus is wanting us to be people like that.

Then the text moves on. It comes down from the mountain and that's where the whole reality happens. It's not negative five as a metaphor, sitting by the beach in a warm southern California day, thinking about those people, you. You. I often think about you on the beach in southern California. Well, I read they were minus five today. Oh my gosh, minus five. Well, okay, well let's move on. It all feels sort of metaphorical.

No, it's not metaphorical. It's extremely tangible. What happens when we come down the mountain and we encounter reality? When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. There was a leper who came to him and knelt before him saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed and then Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony to them."

So am I going to live the truth? Is voice and touch going to come together? What happens if I'm called, as Jesus has said in the sermon, to not only love those who love me, but actually love those who don't love me and even people who are my enemies. What happens when I come down in a world that is filled with possibilities of uncleanness, actually walking into a world where the clear expectation was that every leper would simply proclaim unclean, unclean, unclean as a way of setting a boundary so that your purity is being guarded, even though my identity is being negated. I'm going to surrender my identity for the sake of your purity so that I get to go on as a recipient of that warning from the leper living the pure life that I want to live.

Jesus knows the boundaries, he understands he's not supposed to come near, he understands that expectation. In this case he stops, he takes in what the man says, "If you choose, you could make me clean." Jesus heard those words, it was not a declaration. Imagine the courage of this man with leprosy, daring to say out into that sphere where everyone knew how the cues went, "If you choose, you could make me clean." And then Jesus says, "I do choose, I do choose." And then he steps toward the man, touches him, and heals him.

We may not live in a world where there's lots of lepers in our life, but we do live in a world where there's a lot of people who we fear might stain us. I think again I learned so many lessons about people who stain you, that's what middle school was all about, like who you want to go near and who you definitely do not want to go near, and how that whole dynamic is going to shake down, who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down, all of those dynamics, the social dynamics, that actually get not just forgotten or matured beyond, sometimes that happens, but often they just get internalized very, very subtly, sophisticatedly nourished so that I know and just find a way to live in the world where I just avoid the people that I want to avoid and don't go near any of them in order to have my, as some commentators are calling it, my self-curated world.

Not long after 9/11 there was an article in the Wall Street Journal about the growing popularity of private jet travel for those who could afford it, and it zeroed in on one particular guy who was a widget maker who could afford to do this, and the person writing the article zeros in on the interview about how this had unfolded. He said, "Well, you know, it just all happened on

one day where I was flying from one coast to the other, and there was a woman, if you can believe it, who was in business who had a baby that cried the whole way across the country, and I decided right then and there that settles it. I'm never flying commercial again."

And then he gave us his mission statement, and it was this, so listen to this, he said, "Because I've decided that the really important thing to me is to exclude from my life anyone who might bum me out." Okay, let's just kind of meditate on that for just for just a moment. Okay, my mission statement is this, that I've decided that the really important thing to me is that I would exclude from my life anyone who might bum me out.

Now first, of course, I was offended by this, I thought that's just disgusting, until about 15 seconds later, because, you know, I don't really do the jet travel thing, that's not really my economic bracket, but it's not true that I don't do all kinds of things to exclude from my life people who might bum me out. I do that seamlessly. I do it expertly. I do it with all the possibilities that a person like me can do that in the world, just because I can. And it doesn't even appear. It seems invisible, maybe even non-existent. I just get to live my life with the people I like to be with.

I loved having an assistant for so many years because of that. They existed to protect me from people who might bum me out. I love the fact that caller ID is on our phones. I love... No, no, I'm not going to take that call. No, there's this seamless way and it's where it guards and defines where we live. It defines who we know, whose voices we actually hear, whose circumstances we're willing to take all the way in, whose reality of life absolutely other than our own might cause us the suffering of being willing to listen to another narrative, whose story and life in the world, like the temperature, is not a metaphorical difference.

If you live in poverty in urban America, it is not a metaphor. If you're a black person in lots of settings, it's not a metaphor. For Asian American, it's not a metaphor. It's actually a life in the world which, because of how we sort our sociologies, can often end up meaning that we simply don't come near the leper, the person who might stain us. So who might stain you? Who are the people that as you walk through your world, you just have so developed a capacity to just avoid, to not come near, to not listen.

Are there people that are for you? Maybe not people who are violators, but people who might just really annoy you. Do you know anyone who annoys you? Are they sitting next to you? Do you come to this service because the really annoying person in this church goes to the first service. It's all calibrated in a very seamless way, constantly, constantly calibrated. I will sit with these people, but not with those people. That would be awkward for me if I sat with those people. I really would rather sit with these people.

So what if we decided that we were just going to start trying to love those who just annoy us? That would be a gigantic step forward. What about maybe upping the ante a little bit of people who really actually offend us? Not in any way that's other than you're not my people, but just in a way that's enough that's like, I just don't really like hearing your voice, frankly. It's your voice. Really, if you can just get that voice under control, we could like be connected somehow, but really that voice, I just can't really handle it. Just practice in all those little ways.

In this way, in this context, Jesus is giving to a person of extraordinary capacity, of mind, of will, of strength, of courage, a willingness to declare, "Beyond I am unclean, I am needy, and you could make me clean if you choose." There's a lot of people around us that are wondering, "Could you choose to love me? Could you first just start by seeing me, by listening to me, by actually hearing and trusting what I'm actually saying? Could you actually take that in and let it affect how you respond, not by stepping away, not by diverting, not by referring them, but by actually engaging them?"

One day, I was stuck at O'Hare for many, many, many, many hours, and it was in a very compressed area, and there was almost no food, except for one fast food place that I particularly dislike. So I'm now trying to get some food somewhere, and now I'm perched on the edge of a moving sidewalk on that little, you know, tiny edge about that big. And I noticed there's this guy in line at the fast food place who's hitting on women as they're walking along, just like person after person after person. It was like, "What a cretin, I'm saying, in my Christian heart. What a cretin."

So I sort of watch him for a while, realize he's not very successful, and I lose track of that story and start watching someone else, until suddenly I realized that that guy that had been in line hitting on all the women had seated himself right here.

So I said, "So, is that your usual success rate?"

And he said, "Wait, what? What?"

"Well, I was just watching, you know, you're trying to connect with women who are walking by you, just wondering if that was your usual success rate, whatever it was you were saying to them. Clearly, they weren't interested."

He goes, "I know, I just didn't, I was not on my game." I think he began to speculate about other lines that he had forgotten to use that he really thought would have been successful. He commended them to me. I said, "Thanks for the tips. Those are good things to know. What are you doing? I'm waiting for my plane. Fair enough. Where are you going? Las Vegas. Where are you going in Las Vegas? Because I have to get out of here." I said, "Here, you mean O'Hare? No, out of Chicago. I hate this place. Why do you hate this place?" He sat for a long time, and he said, "Well, I hate this place because today was supposed to be my wedding day, but two weeks ago, my fiancé was killed and murdered in the neighborhood that we live in. And now all of that is completely lost, and the people that are around me are really not helpful people, and they're certainly not helpful in a moment like this."

The story that unfolded was a story of a man in acute need who was lost really in so many different ways, so confused. "What are you going to do in Las Vegas? I'm going to be a cop. Great. I'm thinking to myself, great. A really angry cop, bitter over so many things. Landing in Las Vegas. You know anyone in Las Vegas? No, I don't really know anyone in Las Vegas. So, well, I know some people in Las Vegas. They actually work in law enforcement. I actually know other people who would simply just be people that you could talk about your experience with, because this has been so traumatic. It's obviously just explained that. That all unfolds.

What happened in that first was that Mark Laverton, by his own self, would never actually have spoken to this guy. Cretan. And instead, over the time, God has gradually sometimes softened my heart enough to be able to go, "Hmm, a Cretan. He was a human being." Don't know his story. Why would he be like that toward women in line? What's that little narrative

about, "Hey, we're here for a long time. We can talk. It's possible. I didn't want to give you 'in his life,' but it turned out I could connect him to things in his life." None of that little paradigm would have happened if something about this message hadn't begun to sink in me, because I am as good as anyone else in the world in being Mark guarded north, south, east, and west by Mark, unless Jesus sets us free to be light and salt in the world.

All I know is that at the end, he knew something about Jesus. He also knew there was something about a compassionate community of people who would and did actually receive him, respond to him, and help him in those early months as he was adjusting to a whole new life and a tragic loss. But we have no idea, actually, how close we are to that those kinds of realities at any given moment. Sometimes even a kind word is a sign of a freed life, moving toward, not away, not avoiding, but engaging, seeing, listening, hearing, and responding.

Now, the next and final section of this text is an even more challenging one. If the first is about how to avoid and respond, or respond to people who were actually those who stain us, now Jesus tells us what to do about our enemies.

"When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion, a Roman official, came to him, appealing to him, and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed in terrible distress.' And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.' The centurion answered, 'Lord, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes into another come, and he comes into my slave, do this, and the slave does it.' And when Jesus heard him, he was amazed, and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I heard such faith.' I tell you, many will come from east and west, and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom of heaven will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And to the centurion, Jesus said, 'Go, let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

It is a big thing to learn to love people who might stain us, but it is a bigger deal to learn to love people who are our enemies. So the Roman centurion was the embodiment, literally, of Rome's vicious dominating power, fully present to this moment, walking into a space filled

with almost surely very few Romans and far more Jews and others who would know exactly who this official was, and exactly the oppressive regime that they represented. And in that context, what happens is that first the man comes in, and the text gives you a suggestion that without a pause, he immediately, having probably gotten the attention of the crowd, Jesus is addressed by him. 'Lord,' he says, 'my servant is in need.' In the context of that, he goes on to hear Jesus' response, 'I will come,' to which the man says, 'No, no, no, that's not really the point. I get it. I know how power actually works. And in this case, all you need to do is say the word and my servant could be healed.' And in that, Jesus actually hears what's beneath the words, which is, 'Oh my gosh, this is an extraordinary expression of faith.'

The text says Jesus was amazed. There aren't many places where that phrase occurs in the Testament. This is a distinct moment. He says to everyone, 'Did you hear what just happened? Now the light is turned even more, perhaps, spotlighted on the man, but now Jesus is not spotlighting him because he's an enemy. He's spotlighting him for the exact opposite reason. Did you hear what he just said? I just want to say, Jesus says, 'I've never heard faith like that in all of Israel. No one else has understood the nature of God's power in the way that that man has just declared. That man the enemy. That man the enemy who has just spoken the truth.' And then Jesus is taking it so further says there are some who are estranged from God, who will actually be found in the household of God. And there are others who absolutely believe that they are the true believers in the household of God, who will be found in the outer darkness because they lack this kind of living faith, this hearing and doing faith, this willingness to trust faith, and it came out of the mouth of the enemy.

In sharing that, as you know, Jesus says, 'It's not a big deal if you love those who love you.' The question is what do you do about people who don't love you, who don't like you? People who are even your enemies. He doesn't deny there are enemies in the world. There are real enemies in the world. There are forces that are truly enemies in the world. The question is what do we do about our enemies? In the sermon on the mount Jesus ended up in very unadulterated way simply says, 'Well, the call of people in the Kingdom is to become enemy lovers because actually we follow an enemy-loving God.' How did we know that? Because it was while we were yet sinners, enemies, that Christ died for us. You think it's a big deal to love an enemy. God loved you. God loved me. And now in this text Jesus is saying by example, see, living out the sermon, doing the truth, not just saying it, certainly reaches

toward those who might stain us. But now a confrontation with the enemy. Jesus hears his words and he affirms his faith and he holds him up as an example and he heals his servant. Extraordinary. How can that happen? Because as he is laid out in a sermon on the mount, life in the Kingdom is a life of freedom. Jesus isn't really bound by the law but founded in the law. Fulfilling the law and now fulfilling in the world is a shock to those who are paying attention. Not least to the centurion and not least to those who heard Jesus' direct and indirect exhortation. He is the one that gets the gold even though he is the enemy. Jesus scrambles reality. He scrambles it in a way to redefine it based on a love and a character and a mercy and a justice which is God's. And he says now I want those of you who are really followers of me to go down this road in the same way that I'm trying to go down this road and live out this reality in the context of whatever those circumstances might be which includes enemies.

That takes time. That's not something that happens overnight. That is a vocation which has huge challenges. Let me introduce you to a woman I've written about named Doris. Doris at the time of this story was 87 years old. A tall, thin-boned, elegant lady. The kind of older lady 87 years old who had her hair done every Friday at 11. That sort of Presbyterian woman. Her glowing beauty was striking. Her lived experience was far more striking. I hear a word one day that something terrible had happened Doris that she'd been hit by someone somewhere near our property. I didn't understand exactly what that was. I thought maybe this is going to be my chance to actually be Doris's pastor because she had been my pastor on so many occasions. So I rush over to Doris's house. She's a little ruffled but she invites me in and I sit down.

Doris, I heard that something terrible happened this morning. What is it? I don't have any other pieces of the story. She said it was just beginning in this ordinary way. I just parked in that usual place. You know that place that I always park but yeah I do know that place. Well I was just parked in that usual place and I got in out of the car and I was reaching back across the console to get the nut muffins. Remember those nut muffins? I think you like my nut muffins. Anyway these nut muffins, I was just trying to get the nut muffins out of the passenger seat. When someone struck me from behind, pushed me across the console and put me into the passenger seat, grabbed the keys out of my hands, put me in the ignition, shut the door and we took off.

I'm like oh my gosh. I said Doris this is just unbelievable. She said it is unbelievable. So I asked him his name. First note to self. When you get kidnapped, ask your kidnapper's name. So begin with the basics. So who are you? What is your name? Jesse. It turns up. Jesse. Hey Jesse, Doris. What is happening? What is going on? You're going to the bank because I'm need money. I'm inviting you because I'm a drug addict. I'm going to get you to give me your code and I'll withdraw as much money as I can. We'll do that a few stops and then we're done. This is terrible, she said. Have you done this to other people? I think you have done this to other people. What a terrible thing to do. And finally it's a terrible thing really to be a drug addict. I mean that's an awful life to live, don't you think? I mean it's a really bad thing. This is an awful story. Like what is going on with you? First stop, first cash. It's the money gets back and the car goes up multiple stops. Eventually the moment comes where Doris is going to be off by the side of the road. Doris can't be out of the car because she's sort of a bit battered by being pushed across the console. So Jesse comes around to the passenger's side of the car and opens the door for her and helps lift her legs out, then escorts her around to the driver's seat, helps her get into the car, lifts her legs up again, puts the seat belt across her and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Jesse, Doris says, I want you to be arrested. I'm going to pray that you get caught. This is terrible and it must be stopped. Secondly, you need a really good drug rehab program. He said, no, no, I've had lots of drug programs. She said, I know, I know, I know. I actually know about drug rehab programs. They're all good ones. I'm going to say you need a really good drug rehab program. And thirdly, you need Jesus. I'll take care of that. But really, all these things are going to be at the front of the agenda. I'm going to pray that all this happens.

So I said, Doris, this is just staggering. Would you pray for me as I recover from the trauma of your trauma? This is just like unbelievable. How could this possibly, how could this happen to you? So she led us in prayer and I was once again, amazed by Doris's life.

So no surprise, two weeks later, Doris gets called into a lineup. Sure enough, there's Jesse, third from the left. Eventually this leads to coming into the courtroom with her. She's in the witness box and basically she says, hey, Jesse, it's me, Doris. Remember, we had that time in the car. And judge, I just want to say everything he's been accused of, that's all true. All of it is

true. It's all exactly how the facts unfold. And the thing is, he needs to be stopped. So I certainly hope we'll find him guilty and he will be put in jail. Secondly, I just want to make clear that he needs a really good drug rehab program. And she sort of specified a little bit about what that would be. And then she said, now he also needs Jesus because this whole thing that he's into is like way bigger than him. I'll take care of that. He's convicted, he's put in jail. And then for the next six months, Doris goes almost weekly to visit Jesse. And the story was never about her victimhood. She was only incidentally interested as it happened to her. By the grace of God, she had not been badly injured. First, surprise shocked, but not undone. In jail, Jesse, you are loved by God because the real story for Doris' mind goes, he's in a bad place. And the God that I know is a God that loves enemies. And he may be my enemy on the day that he assaulted me and kidnapped me, but he's also the guy that God loves. And I want to bear witness to the whole reality, not just to the wrong that he had done.

Where do you get that freedom? You get it by living as she had for 87 years. A journey of unexpected life, a vulnerability, of a willingness to step toward the other, of a capacity to say, "I do see you. I know your name. I hear you. I hear it's behind what you're saying. I understand something of the journey that you're on. I realize it's too big for you." And it was compassion that she had toward Jesse. And I never heard her ever talk about Jesse, except in words of compassion. It could have been an entirely different story. But what we even would have called absolutely justifiable reasons, the day I was kidnapped, fair enough that that's worth like padding on your story. But in this case, that isn't the interesting part. It gave her a chance, as ironic as this sounds to know Jesse and try to be a help in the name of God in Jesse's life.

These are not easy things. This is why we need to be saved from ourselves. We need to be saved from our myopia. We need to be saved for the love of God for the world that we inhabit whether they are annoying or truly irritating or really offensive, whether they might stain us or not whether they are our enemies. Other than a moment like this where the division of church in America is as great as it is or that the reputation was. Yes, the nation is divided but the church has never been more united in authentic embodied love, especially for enemies. And that the rap on the street is often as hateful as anyone else.

That indictment is intensified for me when I read a chapter like this. I ask, "Where is the church showing up with peculiar love to see and hear and love and engage? People who are

not like us, people who may offend us, people who may even be our enemies?" What this area of the world needs what you're reaching in non-metaphorical minus seven degrees, is people who show up of people of unexpected love that are free because Jesus Christ has set us free. To see and know and love and serve in a way that we can never imagine.

And it is a draw, whether it's the Cretan on the walkway, an unbelievable tale, or a story of Doris. Or a story of so many countless kinds. And part of what you are seeking to be and I think are embodying is this kind of tangible love for one another and for the world. Lord, may it be so, and may it be intensively more so, as you think about and make yourself available for the unexpected, unseen, unheard person, circumstance or reality that you believe because of the voice of God's Spirit in your heart and mind, called you to move toward and not away with love and not with judgment, with hope and not with despair or anxiety. That is a vocation of saltiness. May it be yours and mine every day.

But in your mercy, take these words and in so far as they bear witness to you and to what Jesus himself has demonstrated and said, that we might actually live a connection between what we profess and what we do and walk with vulnerability into a world of great need. For the tangible witness of your love means actually showing up in the body, heart, mind, soul and strength for the welfare of others who may be around us. Set us free, O God, from our fears. Set us free for your love. In Jesus' name, Amen. You did it.