Sermon Note: Begin with Love
Second Sunday of Easter

Introduction
As we begin our post-Easter series *Reckless Love*, we open with a question central to our Judeo-Christian faith: of all the commandments, which one comes first? Most Christians remember Jesus' response when asked in the synoptic Gospels, and perhaps we might consider that we're a bit too familiar with what Jesus says. Perhaps we've been looking at it backwards.

This Sunday, we take that backwards look seriously. Reading from Mark 12 and Galatians 5, we ask what it means to begin with love as a primary practice we might choose at the beginning of every day, every conversation, every decision. Bishop Tom Berlin's *Reckless Love* is our companion guide as we journey together toward love.

Illustration Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A75AgrH5eqc
In this clip from *As Good as It Gets* (1997), Melvin Udall tries to pay Carol Connelly a compliment, and the result is both awkward and beautiful.

Why This Video?
Sometimes people draw something out of us that we couldn't have imagined on our own. Melvin shows up for Carol with no script and no strategy, just an awkward, honest attempt to say something nice. What comes out is surprisingly genuine. That's how it works sometimes — we find out what we're capable of giving in the middle of giving it.

Video Discussion Questions
1. Melvin announces he has a compliment, then talks in circles for a long time before he gets to it. What do you think is happening during all that rambling? Why does he take so long to get to the point?
2. Melvin's compliment is that he started taking his medication, a small, unglamorous act of change. Why does that register as a compliment at all? What does it tell you about what love actually looks like in practice?
3. Carol says she doesn't understand how what Melvin said is a compliment for her. His answer is arguably the most famous line of the film: "You make me want to be a better man." What makes that line stand out after everything that came before it?
4. Carol braces herself at the start: "I'm so afraid you're about to say something awful." Think of a relationship where you've learned to expect the worst from someone. What would it take for that person to surprise you? What would it take for you to let them?

5. Melvin doesn't prepare what he's going to say, and it shows. Think of a time when you said something honest to someone and it came out messy. Did the messiness help or hurt what you were trying to say?
6. Melvin admits at the end that he may have overshot a little; he was only trying to say enough to keep Carol from walking out. Think of a time when you aimed for just enough in a relationship and found you had more to give than you expected. What happened?
7. Carol calls it "maybe the best compliment of my life." What do you think she's responding to?

Mark 12:28-34 (NRSVue)

[28]One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" [29]Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; [30]you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [31]The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." [32]Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; [33]and 'to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [34]When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Galatians 5:16-26 (NRSVue)

[16]Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. [17]For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. [18]But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. [19]Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, [20]idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, [21]envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

[22]By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, [23]gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. [24]And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. [25]If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. [26]Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Scripture Study Questions

1. The scribe tells Jesus that loving God and neighbor is "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Why does that need to be said out loud? What does it tell you that even faithful people need to hear the obvious?
2. Jesus quotes the Shema and immediately links loving God with loving your neighbor — as if you can't do one without the other. Where in your own life has loving someone else taught you something about loving God?
3. Berlin argues that nothing exposes where we fall short of love like actually trying to love our neighbor. Think of a relationship you've found difficult. What has that person shown you about yourself?

4. Paul lists the works of the flesh in Galatians 5: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels. Sounds less like dramatic moral failure and more like an ordinary Thursday! Which of these do you find most often in your own life? What happens when you notice it?
5. The fruit of the Spirit doesn't arrive fully formed. Think of a time when you were trying to love someone difficult and found yourself becoming more patient, more kind, more gentle than you expected. What was that like?
6. Paul says, "Live by the Spirit." What does that look like in your daily life? When have you experienced it, and how did you know?
7. Why do you think we need God to sustain love for our neighbors? What happens when you try to do it entirely on your own?

Weekly Action

This week, pick someone you find it hard to love. Before each encounter or conversation with them, make a deliberate choice: I am beginning here with love. Choose it as a practice, even before you fully feel it. At the end of each day, write down one moment where that choice changed the quality of an encounter. What did you notice? What surprised you? Then, pray for that person and ask God to deepen your capacity to love them. Explore how that prayer impacts you over the course of the week.

Prayer

Jesus, our loving Savior: your grace alone allows us to grow into the people you would have us be. By your Spirit's power, may what we have read and explored this week take root in our hearts as your gentle guidance to us. Free us from the ways of loving that are too careful, too measured, too small. And when we gather together, may we have stories to share of how our love for our neighbors and our love for God continues to increase. Amen.

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