

# Reckless Love: Week One – Begin with Love

March 1, 2020 – Pastor Katie Matson-Daley

Our worship and formation series for the next six weeks focus on the theme of Reckless Love. Jesus was reckless with his love. People talked about the kinds of people Jesus loved, like tax collectors and sinners. People who would deny Him and people who would betray Him.

Sometimes, we can fall into one of two extremes when we think about the life of the church.

For some of us there is an impulse to control. To make rules, to draw the circle tight and say these are the in people these are the out people.

For others of us there is an impulse to reject all boundaries and rules. Everyone is welcome, there are no rules, it's a free for all.

Both impulses are rooted in something very good. Safety and stewardship, thinking strategically and plan-fully and having clear expectations are all very good things.

Being lavish in our love and extending welcome across borders and boundaries are also very good things.

But while both impulses are good, they come with problems.

I was a substitute teacher for a few years in Minneapolis Public Schools. When I would sub for the most rigid and disciplined teachers, the classroom would fall into chaos on sub day. Free from the control of their day to day teacher, the kids explored their new freedom.

When I would sub for the most relaxed teachers likewise, the kids would also be a little chaotic. Without a clear routine and the presence of a familiar teacher, both me as the substitute teacher, and the kids would feel anxious and unsure of what to do.

The best classrooms were those where there was a regular routine, clear expectations, built on love and respect, and the recognition that everyone in the class had gifts to offer.

I'll never forget one day I showed up to one of the high schools. The lesson plan for first hour 9<sup>th</sup> grade social studies, said, "Eric will lead a discussion on the Holocaust." That was it. As a sub I started freaking out, thinking of resources I could find, questions I could add, trying to remember what I knew about the Holocaust. I quietly cursed under my breath that this teacher would leave such a stupid lesson plan.

The first bell rang, 9<sup>th</sup> graders started to come in, they sat in their desks, and chatted. A ninth-grade boy came up to my desk and said, "Hello, my name is Eric, I believe that Mr. So-and-so left plans for me to lead a discussion of the Holocaust."

"That's correct," I said.

"Ok, well as soon as the second bell rings, I'll get started."

And he did. For the next 45 minutes he led a discussion about the holocaust that was grounded in the readings and respectful and engaged everyone in the circle.

Imagine that you were trying to hold water in your hands. First, hold on to it tightly; clench your hands into a fist. What happens as I pour the water into your hands when they are bunched up like that?

Now hold them with your fingers spread as wide you can and your hands as flat as a plate. What happens when you hold your hands like that?

Love is a little bit like water. If you try and control it and hold onto it too tight it will be pushed out of your life.

If you are too loose with it, it will run right over you and you won't be able to catch any at all.

Nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, but the work of a Christian is to grow in love of God and neighbor. That means we've got to hold on to love in a way that has boundaries, but not in a way that is controlling.

So, when we talk about reckless love this Lent, I don't mean love without accountability. We're talking about love that dares to respect people as image bearers of God.

Katherine Johnson died this week at the age of 101. She was an African American woman mathematician who helped put John Glenn into space in the segregated south. She was featured a few years ago in the movie *Hidden Figures*. Again, and again, Katherine said the key to her success in life was a lesson her father taught her. "You are no better than anyone else, and no one else is better than you."

This passage and the similar passages in other gospels are so familiar. Our ears and our minds and our hearts can almost become numb to a passage when we hear it so many times. But I don't want us to do that. Love God, love your neighbor. We've heard it before, but we need to hear it again and again. Not because the words are hard to remember, but because the ideas are hard to live.

Loving God is hard. An invisible being, who is sometimes even hard to believe in. Someone who sometimes seems far off, or unfair. Someone who is often silent. There are times when it is hard to love God.

But God is also fighting for us, God provides for us, God redeems, heals and saves us. God hears our prayers. God is love. There are times when loving God is hard, but a lot of the time, loving God is not the hardest part.

There are people that are genuinely hard to love. People who irritate and annoy, people who are mean, people who are needy, people who follow a different set of rules than you do. People who smell. People who walk too slowly on the sidewalk in front of you.

Even the people we've pledged our lives to in our marriage vows, or parents, children and siblings, people are hard to love sometimes.

Michelle Obama often speaks about President Obama leaving his socks on the floor. God has never left dirty socks on the floor at my house and I suspect the same is true for Mrs. Obama.

Not only is it easier most of the time to love God than it is to love people. It's also easier to fake your love for God. Show up to church, sing a few songs, put a check in the plate, don't get arrested or have a story in the newspaper about what a big jerk you are, and you can fool yourself and others into believing that you're loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

It's harder to fake the funk when it comes to loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Tom Berlin talks a lot about barnacles in the first chapter of *Reckless Love*. Boats, after being in the water for some time, start to pick up barnacles on their hulls. These creatures start with just a few barnacles, but they spread rapidly. Believing that we are better than someone else or believing that someone else is better than us is a major source of barnacles on the soul.

The shipping industry loses millions of dollars in fuel each year, because barnacles add drag to boats. Barnacles not only cause harm by what they add on top of the surface of the boat, but they can eat into the hulls of boats and create holes.

Sin, failing to love God and neighbor as we ought to, this is the root of the barnacles on our soul and it's often in our relationships with other people that we become aware of the rough spots. When a boat has a barnacle problem, it is either kept in the water and sprayed with high pressure water to knock the barnacles off, or it is pulled out of the water and an electric saw is used to cut the barnacles away from the boat.

Lent is traditionally a time of spiritual disciplines and practices to help us grow in love of God and neighbor. It's a time of having the power wash, or the saws-all of God's Holy Spirit remove the barnacles that keep us from loving God and neighbor.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he talks about the two kinds of ways we can live. By the flesh (in other words covered with barnacles), or by the spirit, Eugene Peterson translates it this way:

"It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, and serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely."

Removing the barnacles on our souls, for most of us is not a one-time thing. Just like we need to brush our teeth twice a day to remove plaque and tartar, rather than brushing our teeth once and declaring our teeth clean forever, we need spiritual practices and God's presence to continue to look for and remove those barnacles from our soul.

Each week during Lent we'll be giving you a little phrase that we invite you to use as a spiritual practice, a way of removing the barnacles from our souls.

This week our practice is to "Begin with Love."