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“A Love So Near”
Deut 6:1-9; Lk 10: 25-28

I'd like you to travel with me now to Casablanca. You've all been there – at least in the movies once or twice, right? We're entering Rick's Café Americaine where the music is lively, the drinks are free-flowing and the gambling never stops. There's a great mix of men and women at Rick's tonight, as thousands of refugees from all over Europe have found Rick's to be a much-needed diversion from their thoughts of home and World War II. The Nazis were beginning to make their presence felt at Rick's, adding a touch of tension in the air. Rick (played by Humphrey Bogart, but then, you know that) does what he can to keep the atmosphere light.

In walks Ilsa, the love of Rick's life. Rick and Ilsa fell in love in Paris not many years before but they were ripped apart for reasons Rick never understood. Ilsa (played by Ingrid Bergman, but then, you know that, too) innocently arrived in Casablanca just that day. She couldn't've known that her beloved Rick was there. Ilsa is accompanying the war hero, Victor Lazlo. In spite of her love for Rick - and bound by her duty to her vows - Ilsa reveals to Rick in a moment of desperation that Lazlo is also her husband.

With or without Ilsa's urging, Rick knows that Lazlo needs to reach safe, American soil if his war efforts against the Nazis is to continue. Rick understands that the efforts that he, too, feels strongly about will be better served if Lazlo gets out. Ah, but what about his beloved Ilsa? Her tear-filled eyes look into his and she says, “You have to do the thinking for all of us.” In the not-so-surprise ending (although it gets me every time), Humphrey Bogart makes a few dangerous plays that could get him killed and a couple of generous ones that keep him from realizing his dream of returning to America with the only woman he'll ever love. Bogart helps his greatest adversary leave Casablanca with his wife, all in the name of love.

War brings together strange bedfellows. War creates new neighbors
“Neighbor” in Hebrew (like in Greek and English) means “to be near.” And in the New Testament reading today, Jesus is telling us that we should be near to all those who need our love, our help and our compassion. In this sense, then, the whole world becomes one neighborhood.

When deference to a document, or a position, or a race or age or nationality or even simple, selfish motives wins out over expressing Christian love to another, we distance ourselves from those whom God has brought near, all those whom God has drawn near to us, and those to whom God has drawn us near, all in an effort to perpetuate the love of God. Ultimately, we find ourselves feeling distanced from God, Godself. What matters most in our world of neighbors, then, is not geographic boundaries or categories of people we call neighbors. What counts is an understanding that all of those who are in need have a claim on our love.

Through the full flow of Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" we come to understand that God's love has no boundaries, and neither must what I'll call our "Neighbor love." In any life situation, then, our task becomes a manifestation of our understanding of how we can help the one nearby (in the many senses of the word). Rather than wonder who deserves our care such that the love of each human soul, younger and older, on our side of the debate, or gender divide, or racial profile becomes our paramount concern.

A crisis of sorts enters into our lives when we come to the misguided belief that there is somehow a shortage of love such that we have to choose who should give or receive it. Love isn't a thing we jealously guard as if there isn't enough love to go around. As if love were a resource like water or food that we feel the need to defend or hoard. - As if sharing our love might make it scarce. In the same way that we think of God supplying enough water or food for the world, God provides enough love to meet all the needs of the world by providing enough people in the world to effect a neighborly cycle of love in this world so desperately filled with need. In more descriptive terms, and in recognition of the reciprocal nature of God's love for us, if God asks us to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might, then God is loving us all with all God's heart and with all God's soul and with all God's might. Now, how could that ever run out? We constrain our neighborliness when we think we don't have enough. (You might want to have 30 people over for Thanksgiving, but probably you won't invite them if all you have is a 12 lb turkey. You'd probably tighten your guest list.) Our task is to participate in a just distribution of this sometimes- seemingly-scarce resource. ...Love... Believing, as Rick said to Ilsa, "We'll always have Paris."

A second crisis enters in when we come to think that to love is an end in itself. We can't simply sit in humble adoration of the divine at the expense of human suffering in the world. It's certainly the case that we must love our God with all our heart and with all of our soul and with all of our might and our neighbor as ourselves, engaging our entire person in a decisive, passionate, and intense fidelity to God and God's law like no other. But the love referred to in the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 6 - those words we call the Shema that Jesus surely had in mind when he had his conversation with the lawyer - refers to the action that results from love. To love God requires us to keep God's commandments and to act lovingly toward other people.

So love isn't a sentimental impulse. It's a feeling of loyalty to the justice God wants for all of humankind. This is the foundational understanding of the proper, essential relationship between God and God's people. With these two caveats hanging in the balance, great care needs to be given for why we love and how we act to safeguard against a false sense of being filled from our feel-good good-works while living in sad neglect of the reverence owed to God. An empty accumulation of acts often leads to self-righteous thinking which draws us away from God's righteous intentions. When we value our deeds over devotion our egos are more able to get in the way. We begin to execute what might have otherwise been intended as loving acts as "automatons." Similarly, vain or endless devotion, mindless of the great need of the world leaves a great void God is calling us to fill. When we sit in meditation while the homeless go hungry and the oppressed feel even more defeated, we're giving lip service to God, denying our time and talents from God's

work. We're deceiving ourselves and our neighbors suffer. In its smallest and most succinct form, this summary of the law that we call the Great Commandment is expressed as honor and action of love of God and neighbor. The two shall not be separated.

Jesus offers us the language to embrace the love of the Shema as the center of all faith. He pulls together the integral relationship between love of God and love of "stranger" grounded and motivated in God's saving deeds. His discussion with the lawyer doesn't exhaust the requirements of what it means to love God and neighbor but it does provide direction. -just as Jesus' life provides the groundwork for us to understand that life with God and life with the other are inextricably related.

Now, at the risk of giving Casablanca Rick way too much credit with this analogy – I think that honor and action of love was what Rick had in mind as he sent the man of the war movement packing on that plane with the woman Rick hoped would be forever his. Maybe the rest of Rick's wartime antics were not quite in such keeping with the great commandment, but for me he shines from this one brilliant demonstration of the Great Commandment.

The more technologically advanced of our age would never have let it go that long. For those less technologically savvy, I will tell you that they're doing it through facebook. I spent a day last summer setting up my page. I was determined to match the likes of the youth of America in wall updates, friends named, pictures posted, famous people quoted and videos linked. I didn't get very far... As a matter of fact, I hardly check the site, which I know has become pretty frustrating for some of my "friends."

Speaking of friends, I don't even know who Jean Harper is, but she's one of mine. I suspect that she's actually a friend of a friend of a friend, but I didn't want to appear to be rude in ignoring her friend request (that was probably at the prompting of her friend)...Or did we go to college together? I just don't know.

But I think from facebook if from not from scripture, we can witness that there is certainly no shortage of love to go around the world. Facebook brings friends near who've been far in any sense of the word for far too long so that we don't even know why they're our friends when we ultimately reconnect. The multiplier effect of "friending" on facebook offers a grand analogy for how our neighbor love can grow.

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember all the saints of the church as those at least in our protestant tradition who are not necessarily perfect but who are indeed faithful to love God and to perpetuate the love and teachings of God from generation to generation. I think one of the reasons why we remember the great saints of our lives is because we recall the love that they faithfully shared not only with the world, but with us, in particular. Correspondingly, one of the reasons why we hoard our love, or separate ones we will love from ones we choose not to love is because we have not felt love from them. May our lives be remembered as ones that shared love with the world, not hoarding, nor segmenting, our love, but offering it generously for future generations to carry around in their hearts.

Thanks be to God.