

Mission Possible sermon series
#5 – Cares for Each Other and the Stranger
1 John 4:7-21
Oct. 5, 2014
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Well, this is not the scenario I envisioned when we decided to preach on our vision and mission statements for Lent. Our original plan was to spend time on each part of our mission statement, exploring how well we've done in living it out these past five years and beginning to dream about who God is calling us to be in the next five years. Our goal was to come out of Lent with some feedback and inspiration from you about Crestwood's future.

Now, it looks like Lent will last longer than six weeks. That may not be true on the church calendar, but it certainly feels that way in our hearts. Each day the news reminds us that our world is irrevocably changing, and we have no idea what things will look like when we emerge from our cocoon of quarantine. But we do know things are going to be very different.

And yet, I believe some things won't change. God will still be God, we will still be the church, and we will still have a mission to fulfill in making God's kingdom present in this world. So we're still going to talk about our mission statement because we don't get a pass from living out our faith just because our world is changing. In fact, it's even more imperative now.

The vision statement we put into place five years ago says that Crestwood's vision is "Connecting People to God and Each Other." That statement has become more salient in the last two weeks than it has been in the last five years. I don't know about you, but one of the biggest struggles for me so far during this pandemic has been a sense of isolation. I was already feeling that way to a certain extent and it's only been exacerbated. We extroverts are going crazy being cooped up in our homes! I've started naming all the furniture just so I have someone to talk with. Just so you know, Carl the Couch and Otto the Ottoman do NOT get along. I think they both have a thing for Lola the Loveseat. But no matter our personality type, there's a fundamental sense of disconnect we feel.

So the job of your church staff has shifted to focusing more on this vision statement. How can we help you stay connected to God and each other? We're using social media and technology more than ever to help make this happen. Elders are calling people to check in. We're posting daily devotions and musical meditations. We had our Board meeting last week on Zoom, a video-conferencing website. As the minister, do we get to count that as in-home visits? We will continue to work hard to help you stay connected.

For our mission statement, today we're looking at the line that says we "care for each other and the stranger" Paul writes in Galatians about the importance of caring for each other when he says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." We are not supposed to focus solely on our needs and challenges, as tempting as that can be. Living this life is about more than ourselves, so we are supposed to be mindful of those around us and stay open to the ways we can extend God's care and comfort to them. Sometimes life gives us more than we can handle, and our burdens are too heavy for one person to carry. That's certainly true during these times when we feel like we're carrying so much all by ourselves.

I love my dad. I need to say that up front, because after I tell this story you may think otherwise. I really do love my dad. But there was one year when I almost gave him up for adoption. It was the year I helped him move three times. I didn't mind helping him the first time. Or the second time. But I knew I was in trouble the third time when he didn't start the

conversation with his usual, “Hey boy! What’s up?” but with, “Greetings, my beloved offspring....”

This third move was to a second floor apartment that required negotiating a narrow, twisting set of steps. That would be OK if Dad didn’t have a treadmill, a waterbed, and one of those old console TVs, the kind that came in the heavy wooden cabinet. We managed to get everything up there, but along the way I had an insightful revelation. I used to think I got my bad back from my dad, but now I realize it wasn’t inherited, he voluntarily gave it to me. A body is not meant to carry that kind of load alone.

The burdens we carry can have the same kinds of debilitating effects on us. We try to shoulder the weight, thinking that it’s up to us to carry around this troublesome diagnosis or this dark depression or this work-related stress. And it’s usually only after we’ve passed the breaking point that we finally reach out for help. That’s one of difficult realities of being human: we can only be cared for if we allow others to care for us.

That’s where the church comes in. A church community is meant to be a place where people can unload their burdens without fear of judgment or criticism. No matter what our baggage looks like, no matter the size or shape of the skeletons in our closet, the church should be a sanctuary, a safe place to receive welcome, acceptance, and care, the same things God has graciously given to us in abundance.

That’s what John talks about in our reading for today. He’s telling his congregation that no matter how different people are, no matter whether their colors are red or blue (for their politics or their sports affiliation), no matter how much the other person acts like a self-righteous jerk, the foundation of their relationship with each other should be love, the love that comes from God. He says if you claim to have love but you don’t care for each other, then you’re just blowing smoke, because God is love.

The Greek word for love here is *agape*, a selfless, other-focused love that knows no boundaries. *Agape* is a deep soul love, a love that is not dampened by what a person does because it is focused on who a person is. Agape love is the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love we are called to show as we care for one another. This understanding of God’s agape love brings with it some major implications for how we offer care. It means that, if we’re loving with God’s love, there’s no criteria someone has to meet in order to receive it. We don’t care for them because we like them; we care for them because they need caring. That’s a big relief to me, because I have to admit I’ve said and thought and done some things in my life that at times make me pretty unloveable. My guess is you have, as well.

Caring for others with agape love also means we are willing to enter into their situation, even if we can only do that virtually, to help bear the pain and sadness and anxiety they are carrying while helping them stay grounded in Jesus’ love for them. We have to be careful, because we can err too far one way or the other. We can stand too far back, observing a person’s pain from afar but not walking alongside them. Or we can get so enmeshed in their situation that we end up needing more care than they do. The balance is best illustrated in a drawing from Stephen Minister training. It shows a person down in a pit, the one who is in need of care. Then it shows a person with one foot in the pit and one foot on solid ground, holding onto a tree limb as they help pull the other person up. The tree is Jesus Christ, who provides strength and grounding and safety as we care for one another. We care for others by putting one foot in the pit with them and keeping one foot grounded in reality, all the while connecting them to God’s healing power and love.

Ultimately, the best way to care for someone is not to do for them what WE THINK they need; it's to do for them what THEY NEED done. Sometimes offering this kind of care means putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations for the sake of caring for another. When I was in seminary the pastor of the church where I was working asked me to visit one of the shut-ins. He said Florence could be a bit cantankerous at times, but that she would probably welcome a visit. "It will be good experience for you," he said. When I got to her house, I noticed the lights were off and the blinds drawn. I peered in through the door and saw Florence sitting in her darkened living room. I knocked on the door. "Who is it?" she shouted. I hollered through the door who I was, but she said, "Don't bother yelling, I can't hear!" So I held up the Bible in my hand to show her I was from her church. She shouted, "Oh my God! You're one of those! Don't come in!" Finally, I nudged open the door and said, "I'm from St. Peter's United Church of Christ." "Oh, well in that case, come on in!" I spend a lovely hour with Florence, learning about her life and the sadness in which she lived after her husband died. It was time well spent.

Caring is something we do well here at Crestwood. Several of our ministries are designed to extend Christ's compassion to our fellow church members. Our Stephen Ministry program, our Heart-to-Heart shut-in ministry, and our Caregivers Ministry Team all live out this statement. The challenge our mission statement gives us to is to care for those unlike us with the same agape love as those who are like us. When we gather together again, I expect that church may take on a heightened priority in our society. There will be people passing through the doors of this church that we don't know, that we don't care about, that we may not even like. As our congregation continues to grow, you will begin to see names on the prayer list and in the Crest that you aren't familiar with, and you may be hesitant to help care for them, to provide meals for them, to reach out to them. And yet, God calls us to care for them as a brother or sister in Christ. Our care for them is not dependent upon our approval; it's driven solely by the fact that the other person bears the image of God in them.

The wonderful thing about this part of our mission statement is that we don't have to do anything special to fulfill it. We simply have to take the agape love that has been poured out on us and share from our abundance with others, both those we know and like and those we don't know and don't like. As we sit in isolation for the foreseeable future, I wonder if there's someone to whom you could reach out – a family member, an old friend, an old enemy. Maybe open up the church directory and start calling people. You never know when the right call at the right time can be a healing balm for someone burdened by the world we now live in. We are the body of Christ, and each of us needs each other to live out our faith in this world. Let's stay connected.