

# STAYIN' ALIVE

## Spirit of God: Loving Neighbor

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Jeff Marian

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Back in June the Star Tribune ran a remarkable story about two sisters, now in their 70's, who had been bullied in school. It started when they moved to a new town and a new school when they were about 10 years old. For reasons the sisters never understood, they became the target of rude comments, gossip and profound social isolation which continued through high school.

One of their tormentors, a man named Bruce Smit, found himself increasingly plagued by guilt and shame through this adulthood, until his daughter got tired of hearing about it, tracked down the two sisters and arranged for a luncheon where reconciliation could happen. Sixty years after the bullying began, Bruce Smit sat across from the sisters in a restaurant and, through tears, apologized for his cruel behavior. Though the bullying had altered the course of the sisters' lives, they both embraced Smit and extended forgiveness. As he left the restaurant Smit exclaimed, "I finally feel free." Hold onto that story for a moment. We'll return to it later.

We're in a worship series entitled "Stayin' Alive." We've been talking about the mission that God has given us, to extend the love, forgiveness, justice and healing of Jesus to the world. It's a big mission, but Jesus promised that we wouldn't do it alone. He's given us the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the mission.

Scripture says that the Spirit is like the wind. You know that the wind is blowing because you can feel it on your skin, and you can see the leaves rustling in the trees. In the same way, you know that the Spirit is at work when you feel faith in God's love for you growing in your heart, and genuine love flows from you to your neighbor. And that's a good segue into our scripture reading for today, so open your Bible to 1 John 4:7-12 and let's read it together [NLT].

Jesus came into this world to reveal the depth of God's love for all people. The Holy Spirit produces faith in us to believe that that love is true, and true for me. And when God's love flows into our lives we cannot help but love our neighbor. If you put a hose in a bucket and turn that hose on, the bucket will fill. And if you leave that water running, that bucket will overflow. You and I are buckets, and faith is the hose that allows the love of God to flow into our lives. And because God's love never ends, it just keeps flowing so that our lives overflow with love for our neighbor.

And let's be clear about who our neighbor is. Both by the way he lived and by what he taught, especially in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus defined our neighbor as all people, especially those who are in need and those who are rejected. If we have faith in God's love for us, our lives will overflow with love for our neighbor. Not just the person next door, but the person in need, the person who is rejected. Listen again to the words of our scripture reading today, "Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Let me put that another way. When we fail to love our neighbor, we don't just have a love problem; we have a faith problem. And I want to suggest to you today that that is the case in our world today, including right here in our own nation. Listen to these sobering statistics:

- Sixteen million children go to bed hungry each night in America
- Hate crimes against Muslim Americans...mind you, these are American citizens...are up 20%
- Over 1.5 million Americans are homeless, 40,000 of whom are veterans
- Anti-Semitic incidents have soared to their highest levels in 20 years
- A recent study showed that white, evangelical Protestants are the least likely group in America to advocate for welcoming refugees...those who are fleeing their homeland due to war or persecution

Each of these statistics suggests that we have a crisis of love and faith in our land. I suspect that some of you think I'm now talking about politics but let me be clear: HOW we resolve these issues certainly has political

implications. THAT we resolve them is a biblical mandate. Here are just a few examples from scripture:

*Don't mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead, treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God. – Leviticus 19:33-34*

*Treat one another justly. Love your neighbors. Be compassionate with each other. Don't take advantage of widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor. – Zechariah 7:8-9*

*Jesus said, "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Whatever you did for the least of these, you've done to me." – Matthew 25*

If we say that we have faith, if the Spirit is moving within us, if we are about the mission that Jesus gave us, we will love our neighbor. It is not enough to say that we personally hate no one. It is not enough to say that we have not directly caused anyone harm. If we truly love our neighbor we will advocate for them, actively pursue hope and wholeness for them, and stand against anything or anyone who would seek to oppress or injure them with injustice. That is our call as Spirit-filled disciples on mission with God.

The Fourth of July is just a few days away, a day to celebrate that we are an autonomous nation, free from the rule of others. But I think there's more to true freedom. Do you remember the story I told you at the beginning of this message about the two sisters who had been bullied? That's a story about a failure of faith and love, and the painful impact both on those who are wounded and those who wound. And do you remember what Bruce Smit said when, after sixty years, he experienced reconciliation and forgiveness? He said, "I finally feel free."

Today I want to suggest to you that none of us can truly be free until all of us are free. Free from hatred. Free from oppression. Free from poverty and homelessness. Free from injustice. That is our mission. You may think to yourself, "That mission's too big!" And you'd be right. But that's why Jesus gave us the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that faith and love of neighbor, empowered by the Spirit, can conquer sin and death, and set us all free. Truly free. So, let's pray, and open our hearts to the Spirit, and commit our lives to the mission....