

**Freedom to Love**  
**Sermon 151 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 4, 2022**  
**Mark 12:28-34 and Galatians 5:13-15**

About three weeks ago in Waco, Texas, little league teams from Texas and Oklahoma were playing in a Southwest Regional tournament game. Stands were packed, stress was high. Everyone came to the diamond to watch these young men play the game they live to play. Texas's right-hander, Kaiden Shelton threw a pitch to the batter, Isaiah Jarvis of Tulsa, Oklahoma. The pitch got away from Shelton and struck Isaiah Jarvis on the head, hitting the edge of his helmet just over his left ear. On impact, his helmet flew off and the young batter's body spun around in a full circle before he collapsed to the ground holding his head with both hands. The world watched as he stood back up, attended by coaches and medical staff. In a matter of seconds - which of course felt like years to all of the spectators - Jarvis collected himself and took the walk to first base.

Once on base, Jarvis noticed the pitcher was having a difficult time. In videos posted all over the internet, you can watch Isaiah Jarvis, the young batter just hit in the head with a baseball observing his opponent standing on the mound, looking down at the ground, unsure of what to do next. You can almost see the thoughts in young Isaiah Jarvis's head as his concern for the pitcher grows. Quickly, he tosses his helmet to the side and jogs over to the pitcher's mound, leaving first base unoccupied and vulnerable.

Once there, he puts his arms around Kaiden Shelton, the same pitcher who just pegged him in the head with the ball, and consoles him. Soon, others follow his lead rushing the mound in support and concern for Shelton.

Now, I know very little about baseball. But I do know this: baseball is a sport steeped in ritual, tradition, and superstition. Baseball players go for weeks, months, and sometimes seasons without showering, shaving, washing their socks, whatever the seemingly silly little thing is that is working in their favor, all for the sake of winning. Baseball fans partake in this traditional practice as well, memorizing stats, committing to their own strange practices that give into superstition, analyzing trends, and predicting strategies that might lead their teams all the way to glory. All of this, of course, is above and beyond the actual rules of the sport.

So when young Isaiah Jarvis left his spot on first base, he was not only opening himself and his team to risk, but he was also breaking some of the most elementary rules of the game. Get on base, and stay there until you can make it to the next one. (Of course, I know that's a gross simplification of base-running strategy). In any case, Isaiah Jarvis's move broke all the rules (both explicit and implicit), shattered anyone's expectations, and shocked the world... with love that refused to be contained.

What if we all loved like that?

The question is both practical and theological. It is social and spiritual. And most importantly of all, it is the central question of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Will you follow me? Will you live the way I live? Will you love beyond boundaries? Will you break down the walls and bust through the barriers that fence in and domesticate your love, keeping you - and your neighbors - from experiencing the fullness and freedom of God's love here, on earth?

These questions have been asked in every Christian community from the earliest days. Paul's letter to the Galatians is evidence of this as he urges the new Christians there to prioritize love over everything else:

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants of one another.*

And then he references the Gospel text in focus this week and last:

*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*<sup>1</sup>

These words echoed into a chamber of debate brewing amongst the Jesus followers. As the Gospel spread to the Gentiles there were many different approaches to just how much conversion would be required. Would the Gentile Christians have to follow all the laws of Judaism in order to receive the new covenant of Jesus? Would they have to assimilate into the culture or could they retain some of their own unique identities and heritage and trust that God could love them still?

There were plenty of Juda-izing preachers who brought a more traditional message, saying that Gentiles needed to fully convert, meaning full assimilation into the laws including but not limited to circumcision. These men rested their case on early disciples like James and Peter who obeyed the laws and customs of their day. These were the real apostles, they said.<sup>2</sup>

But Paul was convicted otherwise; he understood that the Gospel was always calling toward freedom and liberation, urging us to set aside the laws that reign in our love, making it only available to certain people at certain times and in certain circumstances.

To be fair, this more domesticated love is only natural. Our brains are hard-wired to love those who look like us, talk like us, live like us, and love like us. We understand their stories and can easily summon the compassion and empathy needed to enter into relationship with them. People who are like us are more than their stereotypes because we

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:13-14

<sup>2</sup> Lopez-Rodriguez, Ediberto. "The Letter of Paul to the Galatians," in *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible*. Fortress Press: 2010. p. 257.

know their complexities as intimately as we know our own. But when our love is contained to these small circles of knowing, we can too easily justify exclusion, dehumanization, and even violence against human beings we see as “other”.

In her book, *See No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur offers a path forward through the spiritual practice of wonder that leads to love.

“Love is a form of sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, and life-giving - a choice we make over and over again. Love can be taught, modeled, and practiced. This labor engages all our emotions. Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And when we think we have reached our limit, wonder is the act that returns us to love. When we choose to wonder about the people we don’t know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of those we see as part of us. We prepare ourselves to love beyond what evolution requires... [we prepare ourselves to say] ‘You are a part of me I do not yet know.’”<sup>3</sup> It is a modern iteration of the German philosopher, Martin Buber’s, I- Thou premise made famous in the 1960s. And it is an echo of Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

There have been many throughout history who understood this kind of love. People like young Ruby Bridges who walked into her school building as white supremacists and segregationists protested on all sides of the sidewalk. People like Fred Rogers who showed us in his weekly broadcast the importance of being a good neighbor to everyone - no matter their race, their job, their class, or their station in life. We have looked up to them and in some cases even venerated people like Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day. We have honored and celebrated people like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Desmond Tutu, who stood in the way of the status quo, breaking the rules peacefully and for the common good. These heroes and heroines of ours are people who have taken seriously and faithfully the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are the champions of revolutionary love, we can see it and we celebrate it, but then when it comes down to it, in our own lives, we struggle to actually do it.

Maybe we think our lives are too small or insignificant? That we could never have such an impact as these remarkable people because, well, we just don’t have the platform.

Friends, I know this might not be easy to hear, but I wonder if that isn’t **just an excuse**.

You see, the key to revolutionary love is not its grand scale and public displays. The key is its persistence. In Kaur’s book, she describes the practice of revolutionary love as a spiritual discipline. It is a refrain that echoes throughout our lives reminding us in every situation that we are all connected, “Caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,”<sup>4</sup> as

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<sup>3</sup> *Freedom for Its Own Sake*. Ben Boswell, delivered on August 28, 2022. Quoting from Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger*.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.naacpldf.org/naacp-publications/ldf-blog/legacy-dr-martin-luther-king-jr/>

King used to say. "Revolutionary love is to look upon the face of anyone [and everyone] and say: You are a part of me I do not yet know."<sup>5</sup>

This is not a love that requires a large circle or public platform. This is a simple, foundational, and disciplined love that can find its expression anywhere and everywhere. This is an everyday love, but it is far, far from ordinary.

I also wonder if we shy away from revolutionary love **because of fear**.

I wonder if we have been stretched and pushed so far beyond our comfort and capacity that we cannot summon the courage to take the risk.

What if I act in love and my neighbor takes advantage?

What if I put myself out there and I am violated as a result?

What if I am generous so much - in the spirit of love - that I am the one who comes up short?

This is what faith is all about. When we take a step toward love, we know there will be risk. But if we never step forward, we will lose out on the joy, the connection, the beauty, and the wonder of God's vision for Creation.

Or maybe we are unable to love our neighbors because **we struggle to even love ourselves**. Maybe we carry with us so much shame, so much disappointment, so much failure, and insecurity that we have lost sight of God's promise that we are loved. Maybe this practice of wonder could help here too? Maybe for those of us who are struggling with self-love, we could replace our image of a judgmental God, one who demands performance and perfection with a more relational and intimate God who looks at us each morning and says: *You are a part of me, and I am a part of you. We are part of one another, you just don't know it yet.*

"Joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love.  
Anger protects that which is loved.  
And when we think we have reached our limit,  
Wonder is the act that returns us to Love."

*You were called to freedom! Freedom to live not for yourselves without restriction but freedom to love without inhibition.*

Kaur begins her book by saying that the whole world is experiencing a transformation - and right now everything seems dark. There is economic uncertainty, political unrest, there are social challenges, and in many ways, it seems like the whole world is on the brink of destruction. But Kaur believes that we can still determine - together with God - whether this darkness is the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://valariekaur.com/>

Paul had a similar vision and it came straight from Jesus. The world is plummeting into despair if we keep on down the paths of self-concern, self-indulgence, and self-preservation.

God has already freed us from those paths, offering a new way of Love - Revolutionary Love - love that cannot be restricted or contained or even fully defined, because this love is always expanding through wonder and courage.

Isaiah Jarvis and Kaiden Shelton had no way of knowing that they would change the world when they stepped out on the diamond to play in their tournament that day. But through one simple act of revolutionary love, through wonder and courage, they did. One boy hit in the head and wounded by the other moved his feet from the base where he was supposed to stay planted. In the middle of the game, he set aside the rules and expectations in order to allow wonder to set love free.

Sometimes it feels dark for us. We feel like we have been hit in the head, knocked down and out by all the brokenness and struggle and hurt life throws our way. Sometimes we make excuses, we lessen ourselves, we struggle to love ourselves, but that just means we are really in the game (and it isn't over yet!). That just means the opportunity for revolutionary love is standing right in front of us: in the mirror, at the table, across the street, across town, and even across the aisle. Love is standing right in front of us, waiting for us to take the first step. We are, after all, the body of Christ, followers of Jesus, lovers, wonderers, liberators.

*You were called to freedom. Not freedom for self-indulgence, but through courage and wonder, freedom to love.*