

Our Mission: Should We Choose to Accept It – John 13:31-35

Rev. Matt Nieman

May 18, 2025

A story from New York City several years ago made headlines: A man walking in Queens stepped in to prevent a woman from being attacked by a knife-wielding man on the street. In the process, the rescuer himself was stabbed and fell to the ground. So, a good Samaritan felt compelled to help a stranger and became a victim.

That, in itself, was tragic. A man compelled to love his neighbor ended up being attacked and injured.

Adding to the tragedy is that the helpful stranger laid on the sidewalk for more than an hour bleeding to death as around 25 people, security cameras revealed, walked by him and did nothing to assist him.

In one case, a man took a cell phone photo of the victim before leaving. At other times, pairs of people stopped and looked at the man before continuing on down the sidewalk, and in another case, another man stopped, leaned over and vigorously shook the guy's body. After lifting the victim's head and body to reveal a pool of blood, he also walked off.

Not until some 15 minutes after he was shaken by the pedestrian — more than an hour and 20 minutes after the victim collapsed — did firefighters finally arrive and discover that the man, 31, had died.

This story made the news, of course, not just because it was a gruesome crime, but because of the reaction by those who saw the man lying there and did nothing. Some may not have seen the blood and thought it was simply a

homeless person passed out on the street. But especially in the case of the man who turned the body over, saw the blood, and then kept on walking, cries of outrage were heard over so many people's lack of compassion and care for one of their own.

How could nobody take action when they saw a bleeding man lying in the street, we wonder. And would we have acted differently?

This story reminds us how easy it is to not love our neighbor.

I live such an exciting life that for entertainment I've reverted to watching re-runs of 60 Minutes on the Roku Channel. This absolutely delights Laura, who had no idea when she met me how adventurous a guy I am.

Last week, I came upon a 60 Minutes story from a few years back about the Carnegie Foundation's heroes program, which honors those in the U.S. and Canada who enter extreme danger while saving or attempting to save the lives of others.

In reading more about the program on its website this week, the recipients of this year's Carnegie Medal for Heroism included a man named Alec Larson, who rescued Jessica Tucker and her infant son, Jordan, from a burning vehicle in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, on April 11, 2024. After a high-speed crash, Tucker and her son remained in their SUV as flames ignited under the engine compartment from gas spilled on the roadway. Tucker had been badly injured and her son, unhurt, remained strapped in his car seat. Driving up on the wreck on his way to work, Larson, 27, carpet cleaner, stopped his work van, grabbed a pair of

scissors and ran to the scene. He opened the driver's side door and helped Tucker, who had suffered multiple broken bones and other injuries, out of the vehicle. She yelled that her baby was still in the vehicle. As bystanders moved her away to safety, the flames grew in intensity under the engine and the vehicle caught fire. Larson tried to open the passenger door but could not. He then ran around to the back of the vehicle, opened the hatch and saw the baby in a rear-facing child seat. He climbed inside the trunk area but was unable to unbuckle the car seat buckle, so he cut the strap with his scissors, grabbed the baby and pulled him out to safety. He handed the baby to bystanders who carried him away from the burning wreck. About 10 seconds later, fire engulfed the vehicle. The baby and Larson were not injured.

What motivated Alec Larson to take heroic action like that?

The 60 Minutes story from a few years ago about these Carnegie heroes, in addition to profiling some of that year's heroes, explored how the brains of some people are just naturally wired for this kind of extraordinary heroism.

Call it what we will, but there's something about heroes who will do extraordinary things out of a love they have for their fellow human beings—strangers or not. The passersby on that street in New York City some years ago would not be included on that list.

Thankfully, we don't have to be heroes to answer Jesus' call to love one another.

In all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary (the set of weekly scripture readings we read in worship),

the Gospel readings for the fifth and sixth weeks of the Easter season are from Jesus' long discourse here in John on the night before his crucifixion. It may seem odd to step back into that pre-crucifixion night at the close of the Easter season. But, one of the primary themes of these chapters from John is Jesus' upcoming return to the Father and what that will mean for his disciples. This is just where the church finds itself today on this side of Easter as we approach Pentecost.

Here in verse 33, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be with them only a little while more, and that they will not be able to go where he is going. Most of them will prove unable to follow Jesus to his crucifixion, but that is not the full depth of what Jesus means. Jesus is returning to the Father, and they cannot follow him there—at least not yet. However, that doesn't mean they cannot know him or abide in his love. And they'll know Jesus, he says, and will continue to follow him by loving one another.

And, in this loving of one another, Jesus says, everyone else will know that they are his disciples.

How does that old song go? They'll know we are Christians by our fancy buildings? No. They'll know we are Christians by our big bank accounts? No.

They'll know we are Christians by our love, the song goes. It's the mantra of the church, the mission of Christians everywhere. That's how the world should know us.

Jesus calls us to this love, even when the world remains hostile and sees only our foolishness.

Our foolishness is evident in a variety of ways: From our misplaced priorities at times, to our wanton disregard

for the poor and the outcast, and to the misbehavior of our pastoral leaders.

For example in the last year in the Dallas, Texas, metro area, local TV station WFAA has kept a running list of local pastors “involved in controversies in 2024.” Last fall, it contained 17 names, including five scandals involving criminal charges. Those pastors’ churches are all protestant congregations from different denominations or no denomination at all. Seventeen pastors have done things so scandalous that they made the news.

When pastoral leaders betray Jesus’ command to love one another—by not maintaining proper boundaries or by taking advantage of vulnerable people, the world notices. And that’s when the world sees us not as disciples but something far less.

“Love one another.” A simple command but not so simple to carry out.

A group of social scientists asked some children, “What does love mean?” The answers they got were broader and deeper than anyone could have imagined. See what you think.

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn’t bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis, too. That’s love.”

“Love is that first feeling you feel before all the bad stuff gets in the way.”

“When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know your name is safe coming out of their mouth.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

“Love is when someone hurts you, and you get so mad but you don’t yell at them because you know it would hurt their feelings.”

“Love is what makes you smile when you’re tired.”

“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate.”

“When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you’re scared they won’t love you anymore. But then you get surprised because not only do they still love you, they love you even more.”

“There are two kinds of love — our love and God’s love. But God makes both kinds of them.”

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

“My mommy loves me more than anybody. You don’t see anyone else kissing me to sleep at night.”

“You really shouldn’t say, ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.”

That love that Jesus demonstrated is the love we are charged with sharing. Love one another.

There’s a new Mission Impossible movie that’s out this week, the latest in the Tom Cruise franchise that’s based on the very old TV series of the same name back in the 60s.

Cruise’s character, Ethan Hunt, in every movie’s opening, is famously briefed on the challenge before him

with these words: “That’s your mission, should you choose to accept it.”

Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to love one another. For in doing so, that’s how the world will know we are disciples.