

Horizon 2035: Love One Another – John 13:34-35, Galat. 3:26-29

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Continuing our series on some of the foundational pieces of our identity as we approach our 40th birthday celebration on July 13, today we embrace our call to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It's been one of the hallmarks of this congregation since its founding. Nearly every day, I witness stories of FPCers fulfilling this command in a diverse array of methods. People who think beyond their own needs and are sacrificing for the sake of others—it is impressive and faithful to our call.

There's nothing ground-breaking in this second greatest command that Jesus issues. It's as familiar as any verse of scripture could be. The wording is also as straightforward as any instruction could be: love each other. And yet, this command is carried out in ways that are as diverse as we are and has far-reaching implications we often don't see coming.

One of the ways in which we love each other is by the old-as-time practice of putting safeguards upon others to protect them from harm. In other words, loving our neighbor sometimes by telling them “no.” And that's difficult because nobody likes to be told no, even if it ensures their safety.

Here's an example.

All parents, since the dawn of the television age, have had to decide how to limit the amount of screen time for their kids. When I was a kid, my parents forbid my brother and I from watching TV during the daytime in the summer when we were out of school.

“What an outrage,” we thought. “None of the other kids we knew had this restriction! What would we do all summer long?” Well, as it turned out, plenty. Because we didn’t watch TV in the daytime in the summers, there was instead baseball, swimming, and other things that filled in just fine on those hot, summer days.

Screen time is different today for kids. We all know it’s not TV but phones and tablets that demand most kids’ attention.

The Harris Poll recently conducted two surveys. The first was that of 1,006 members of Gen Z found that many young people feel trapped — tethered to digital products like TikTok and Snapchat. Nearly half of all participants expressed regret about having access to many of the most popular social media platforms.

The second survey was that of 1,013 parents who have children under 18. The overall picture isn’t any better. Pollsters found widespread feelings of entrapment and regret. Many parents gave their children smartphones and social media access early in their lives — yet many wish that social media had never been invented, and overwhelmingly they support new social norms and policies that would protect kids from online harms.

Almost a third of parents whose children have social media believe they gave their child access to social media too young, and 22 percent feel similarly for smartphones. Notably, for both technologies, only 1 percent of parents thought they had waited too long to introduce them. In other words, parents regret the technologies they gave, not the technologies they withheld. (New York Times, June 18, 2025)

In the title wave of advanced technology, to love those we care most about by saying “no” to them, is one of the hardest things we do. Whether it’s parents regulating their kids’ phone

use, or declining to prop up a friend yet again in a continuing cycle of financial dependency, or telling a loved one their behavior is out of line, standing up and saying “no” is one of the most loving things we can do.

Also one of the hardest things to do these days is to love the neighbors we have who don't agree with us on the most public political or social issues of the day. Those differences are laid bare before us every day in our public discourse, most brashly in the forms of political violence we have seen recently.

The shootings of two state legislators and their spouses (two of them fatally) in Minnesota over a week ago seem to have been a response to the opposing views the gunman had with his targets. Posing as a law enforcement officer, he went to his victims' homes and gunned them down because he allegedly didn't like their positions on issues that didn't align with his radical religious movement he was a part of, a movement where evidently violence is an acceptable last resort toward the goal of stamping out the so-called “evil” he and others like him perceive to be present in the country.

In another episode recently, a man gunned down two Jewish Israeli Embassy staff members in the streets of Washington, supposedly over his disagreement with the state of Israel's practices in regard to its war with Hamas.

As David French wrote in the New York Times this past week, “[People of faith and] Christians [in particular] aren't better than anyone else. We're fashioned from the same human clay, and we're susceptible to the same temptations and failures. And right now — at a time when the Christian message of grace and mercy should shine the brightest — America's [religious] extremists are killing people, threatening and intimidating public

servants and other public figures, and trying to drive their political opponents from the public square.”

Yes, the same human clay. We’re all formed from it. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

We love our neighbors, no matter how different they are from us, because ultimately we aren’t different. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

Loving each other according to our own skills and talents, of which there is great diversity, says to the other, “You have value, like I have value. And because we share that value you, I love you.”

And loving neighbors has a trickle-down effect when it comes to our own well-being.

We’ve talked more than once in recent months and years in this space about the epidemic of loneliness that is gripping our culture, so much so that the surgeon general a couple years ago declared a public health emergency because of it.

In his January 2025 article “The Anti-Social Century” for The Atlantic, Derek Thompson writes about our increased and intentional isolation. It’s not just that we are lonely; we are also choosing to sequester ourselves, to quarantine our own spirits rather than risk “catching” our neighbors’.

Thompson cites data from the National Restaurant Association revealing that takeout and delivery traffic increased by 61% since 2019, much of that due to the pandemic we lived through. But solo dining has risen by 29% in the past two years. While many are still protecting their health and that of at-risk family members, the top reason given for these trends is the need for more “me time.” This rise in chosen solitude, supported by the expansion of food delivery services and streaming

television, is creating what economist Enghin Atalay, quoted in Thompson's article, has called a "century of solitude." (Teri McDowell Ott, Presbyterian Outlook, June 2025)

Now, I as much as any of us appreciate the ability to withdraw and be alone. There's a comfort and repairing of ourselves almost when we who are naturally introverted can be by ourselves. However, there's a downside. And that downside is that we become withdrawn to a prolonged degree, loneliness can set in. Living life in isolation is not healthy. And when we withdraw too much from others, we put our health in jeopardy.

Focusing our attention on others is one sure-fire way to find meaning and satisfaction in ourselves. When we help to meet the needs of others, our own hearts swell with greater joy. And that can invigorate us and distract us, even, from our own pain, heartache, or loneliness.

Loving one another is central to a civilized society. And it's central to each of our own well-beings.

What makes our congregation stand out as a community worthy of our involvement? Is it still relevant? Does it still have a purpose? Among us is great diversity of thought. We are not all alike. Yet what unites us is this common mission to love our neighbors. Our financial giving highlights this. Our hands-on ways in which we serve hints at this. And the individual ways in which we come alongside one another—especially in tough times—validates this.

We are all one in Christ Jesus. And because of it, we love in a variety of ways: by saying yes, by saying no. And in loving, each of us is better off.