

Rev. Alida Ward
Appalachia Service Project Commissioning 2017
Luke 6 -- Sermon on the Mount

It is not news to anyone here, I don't think,
that I am a huge Bruce Springsteen fan.
Others in the room have been to more of his shows than I,
and I bow in deference to them,
but still,
Springsteen has been the soundtrack of my life since I was 16.
Which means that my parents had to listen to his music,
my college roommates had to listen to his music,
and eventually my children had to listen to his music.
Whether any of them wanted to or not.

Once my kids got old enough to sit in the front seat of the car, of course,
they could just reach over and pop out the Springsteen tape.
Yeah -- that's right -- the tape. I'm that old.
But when they were younger, they were trapped in the back,
so they had to listen to whatever I wanted to listen to.
So we're driving along one day,
me and my five-year-old daughter who's now 25,
and we're listening to a Springsteen song called "*Drive All Night.*"
A beautiful, moving ballad in which he declares that there are no lengths to which he will not
go to show his love for his beloved.

Or at least, that's the *feel* of it.
The words themselves are -- to be honest -- a little silly.
He sings: "baby, baby, baby, I swear
I would drive all night for you just to buy you some shoes."
Somehow it works when **he** sings it, but when a five year old hears it,
well, not so much.

"Mom? Why doesn't his baby have shoes?"
"She *has* shoes, honey."
"Then why is he buying her shoes?"
"He's just saying he *could* buy her shoes."
"Oh. Why is he buying shoes at night?"
"Yeah -- no -- it's not really about the shoes."

"Then what is it *really* about, Mom?"
That's when I popped out the tape.
Switched over to the Pocahontas soundtrack.

May Bruce forgive me, but truth is I think the Bob Dylan song that Caroline sang for us gets the idea across in a little less puzzling way --
the Dylan song which the singer Adele re-discovered for us a couple years ago:

I'd go hungry
I'd go black and blue
I'd go crawling
Down the avenue
There's nothing
That I wouldn't do
To make you feel my love
...
Go to the ends
Of the Earth for you
To make you feel my love

Or, as Bruno Mars sang it a few years back, in his own way,
I'd catch a grenade for ya.
A little more gruesome.
But still. You get it.

It's love that will do anything for someone else.
It's love that will go to the ends of the earth,
drive all night,
go crawling down the avenue.
To make you feel that love.

Jesus was not a songwriter.
At least, as far as we know.
But what he said in the Sermon on the Mount was downright lyrical,
worthy of the most powerful of love songs.
He talked about a love that would do anything for the other person.
Drive all night, crawl down avenues, catch a grenade --
all that and then some.
This is what he said about that love:
he said that it was a love that would never judge.

He said it was a love that would never condemn.
He said this love would extend to enemies,
this love would turn the other cheek when it needed to.

What he was talking about was the love that he wanted his followers to have for everyone else,

without judgment, without obstacle.

And the way he summed it up was this:

"I want you to do for someone else what you would want done for you."

That simple. And that extreme.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Someone else's life ought to matter as much as yours,
someone else's hurts ought to feel as deeply as yours,
someone else's needs ought to be your needs.

You got to love someone else --

make that everybody else --

as much as you love yourself.

And be willing to let them know that.

Go to the ends of the earth to make them feel your love.

Next Saturday, 300 people from this community --

actually, 301, come to think of it -- I forgot to count me!

Three hundred and one people from this church's extended family
will be going, not to the ends of the earth,

but on a bus ride that may feel a bit like the ends of the earth.

301 people traveling into the mountains of West Virginia
to "make them feel our love."

To do unto others as we would have done unto us.

To love another as we love ourselves and then some.

We're going because that's what Jesus tells us to do.

Now I know, I know,

that for just about any of us on the trip,

if someone said to us "why are you going to Appalachia?"

the first thing we'd say probably *wouldn't* be "because Jesus told me to."

We'd say "because I hear it's an awesome trip,"

or "I really want to do meaningful service,"

or "I've been given a lot, I want to give back."

Those are all good, true, right reasons.

But it's also true -- that this is exactly what Jesus wants us to do.
To show the kind of love that would drive all night,
and do anything for you.
And in this case, the "you" is the people of Appalachia.

On one of my earliest years on this Appalachia trip,
I was heading up a crew assigned to work on the home of a woman named Mary.
Mary was up a creek.
I mean, literally, Mary lived up a creek.
Mary's house sat at the top of a hill, a huge hill,
thick forest all throughout,
and the only way anyone had ever gotten up there was by using the creek bed as a road.
So to get there each day, we drove up the creek.
You had to really gun the engine in several places to get the van up and over the rocks.
And then finally, you were at Mary's.
Mary was 80 years old, tough as nails,
with a faith as wide and deep as the ocean,
a laugh that made you laugh just to hear it,
a smile of welcome like you wouldn't believe.
And a house that was a hundred years old
with a crumbling foundation and an outhouse out back.

My crew fell in love with her.
And they threw themselves into working for her like I'd never seen a crew work.
Our job was to fix the joists in the floor of the room where her new toilet was going to go,
and she'd stand there watching us,
grinning ear to ear, and saying "can you believe it? 80 years old and I'm finally getting indoor
water. Can you believe it?"
We loved her.

On Thursday of that week, it had rained all night the night before.
And Mary's creekbed road had become a full-fledged little river.
We sat there at the bottom of it, staring at it through the van windows.
And I told my crew that *obviously* I wasn't going to drive through a river,
so we'd just have to go back and hang out for the day,
play cards or something. Rest up.
I figured that would sound good to them anyhow.

They wouldn't hear of it.

"Mary's sitting up there waiting for us," they said,
"and we promised her we'd get the floor ready today."

They didn't want a day off.

So we drove up the creek - slash - river.

It was kind of insane.

We got stuck several times, had everyone out pushing. I slipped and fell in, of course.

I kept thinking taking a day for pizza and cards would have been the way to go.

But not for this crew.

They were more than willing, to quote Dylan, to go black and blue,
crawling down the avenue -- or in this case the creek.

More than willing to go to the ends of the earth for Mary, to make her feel their love.

They loved Mary that much.

They loved her as they loved themselves. And then some.

Over the years, I've seen our teens -- and adults --
show love like that again and again.

I've seen a whole crew, right after they'd showered for the day,
and right before they got their dinner,

instead go and get in their van and drive back to their homeowner
because they saw a storm coming,

and wanted to be sure they'd gotten the roof closed up right.

I've seen 14 year olds hauling railroad ties into place behind a house

because they know that if they don't, the mountainside's eventually going to slide right into a
little girl's bedroom.

I've seen kids cry at the end of the week at the thought of saying goodbye,
at having to leave before the foundation was fixed,

even when they know there'd be another crew coming soon.

I had a bunch of kids last year pull me aside and tell me that they'd figured out what was
wrong with the trip:

that it really should be two weeks instead of one,

so they could get more done for their homeowners.

One ASPer wrote me a whole long poem about her experience,
and in it she wrote

"from digging every single hole

to removing every rusty nail

ignoring every cut and bruise

we simply refused to fail --

for every widow with a caved-in roof

every situation we thought unfair

*for every child who smiled at us
just happy we were there."*

We simply refused to fail.
She, all of them, all of those youth,
all reminded me of that slightly crazy crew that made me drive up a river
because they loved Mary that much.
Nothing they wouldn't do for them, to the ends of the earth for them.
To make you feel my love.

You don't, of course, have to go to Appalachia
to put Jesus' words into action --
to love your neighbor as yourself,
to love without judgment, without question, without even being loved in return.
That's the kind of love he calls forth from us all the time.
While we are gone to West Virginia,
there will be people right here going the extra mile for someone else,
taking a meal down to Operation Hope,
driving a refugee mom to her appointment.
There will be people listening with patience to a friend who needs them,
offering forgiveness to someone who's hurt them,
choosing to make a moral decision instead of an expedient one.
All of that will be happening while we're gone:
loving others as ourselves won't just be going on in the hollers of West Virginia, but right here
--
going the extra mile, loving without judgment, treating others as we would be treated, all of
that will be going on right here, too.

And what makes it all possible, what makes all this love possible,
is this simple truth:
we love because we are loved.
We love because God first loved us.
We walk with people to the ends of the earth because we are loved by a God who does just
that for us.
Think back to the beginning of this service,
to the words of Psalm 23,
words that we shared in our hymn and in our prayer,
and then in Matt Hood's music and imagery.
God is my shepherd, I'll never want for anything.

And even when I walk through the darkest valley,
God, you are right there beside me.
In other words,
God will do anything for us.
Drive all night for us.
Go to the ends of the earth of us.
Do anything, anything, to make sure we feel God's love.

We love because God first loved us.

So now, all of you headed to West Virginia,
knowing how much you are loved by God,
ready to make others feel your love –
I ask you all to come on out of your pews -- let's line the front of the church, and right down
the sides as well --
and I invite everyone to turn in their bulletins to our litany of commissioning.....