

“THE COVERING POWER OF DEEP LOVE”

**A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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By The Rev. Rob Dyer

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(transcribed from audio file)

Let us hear the Word of the Lord. 1 Peter 4:8-11.

And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.

Use hospitality one to another without grudging.

As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. NRSV

It is not easy to work on your sermon during a mission trip. Just gonna put that out there. But I have to say when I opened up the scripture while we were on our mission trip, I thought, well I gotta put some work in on this so I'm ready for Sunday. And I read the scripture I realized that I was living in that scripture passage this week. I was living in a space where love was covering up a multitude of brokenness that was going on. I was in a situation where people were using whatever strength God had given them, the gifts that God had given them to do different work.

The words that were spoken at that camp were words of encouragement and peace and love. That little community that came together from all over, from all different states, all those kids together, and then they sent us out to these work sites. Me and five other random people from Chicago area, Minnesota, Georgia and Ohio were all in my group and we went to a place to build a porch, and do you know how many of us had ever built a porch before? None of us! None of us knew what we were doing. We truly had to rely on what God would provide in that moment for us. And there was an instruction booklet. That was helpful.

There were these people called the red shirts, site coaches, that would show up and they would really know what they were doing. So, they would come and give you

like this 45-minute power lesson on building a porch and stairs and then they left. And then we prayed. But we got our job done.

There were kids doing painting that had never done painting before, putting skirting on the bottom of a mobile home. They had no idea how to do that, but they learned by the end of a week and got all that work done. But we were literally living in this expression of today's passage.

It talks about this idea that love can cover up a multitude of sins. I think that sometimes when we think about the battles we are going through in life, we think about it as a battle between good and evil and so what we end up doing is we end up declaring some things good and some things evil. We've kinda missed the way God looks at this world.

When we got together in these work crews there was this thing that happened in a lot of the groups, and it definitely happened in ours where they would start asking each other questions. It was a way of getting to know one another but usually went something like this.

In my group it was Millie from Georgia who said, "You'al got Bo Jangles where you live? I love Bo Jangles."

And then Minnesota said, "What's Bo Jangles?"

"Oh, my goodness, it's the best chicken you can get. It's Bo Jangles."

"Oh, well I really like Cane's better."

"Oh no. Cane's not near as good as Bo Jangles."

And then someone else would argue that it's not Cane's, but this other chicken place. And so, we had an entire debate about the value of chicken fingers from different places around the world.

Then someone heard the person from Minnesota who talked about, "Hey can you get that beg for me."

"Oh, you mean bag."

Then here comes the Illinois person, “bag”. So now we debated how you are supposed to say the word bag. And some people were wrong, and some people were right and it just went on and on like this.

“You put ketchup on a hot dog? You don’t put ketchup on a hot dog. That’s not right. You only put mustard. Everybody knows that.”

And now there is a debate about what is the proper condiments on a hot dog. So while we were able to come together to do this amazing work for the Lord, somehow, we could not unite on hot dog toppings, the pronunciation of the word bag and the best place to get chicken fingers.

I think sometimes we’ll use the things that divide us to define us. That’s not always good. See, the battle in this world isn’t between good and evil, it’s between love and fear. And these differences, these conflicts that come together, it’s not so much that someone is being evil, someone is just scared of something. They’re afraid of losing their own security. They’re afraid of not having any power for themselves over their own future; afraid of losing whatever security they have. Or maybe they are insecure themselves about something and so they act out and then there is a misunderstanding and now we decide who’s good and who’s evil.

More often we have a communication problem than anything else that goes on. But it’s fear. It’s fear that ends up putting us in situations where we treat each other horribly and we put little things to divide ourselves over.

Elsewhere in scriptures it tells us that perfect love casts out all fear. That fear has no place in love. It’s an opposite of love and that’s what we are called to do, is to bring love to situations and the clearest expression of love that we have to give is forgiveness. The clearest expression of God’s love for us is forgiveness. That’s that moment where we look at a situation where a wrong has happened. Someone out of their insecurity, out of their fears, out of their worries has done something and now we feel wronged, and we look at that situation and we say, I forgive you. That’s love. When we go to serve people, to help people we have to look past any differences we have and simply say, whatever is broken between us, I forgive that, now let’s get to loving and caring for one another.

This is what we are to be about. Too often it just gets ugly. Those same people who debated about bag and Bo Jangles and condiments for hot dogs, at one point a lunch discussion got a little tense, because there was one young lady from our work group who lives up in the Chicago area and she said, “You know, I’m Catholic. I’m here

with my Catholic school and I haven't been to church in years. My parents haven't been to church in years either. We're just not going anymore, and I want to go to church, but it just doesn't I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I don't get anything out of it when I go to that church."

And we started talking about, yeah, it's different. People have their experiences of church and it's okay. It'd be okay if you tried a different church and by the end of the trip she actually found out that one of the other kids in our group only lived 15 minutes away and she's going to start going to that kid's church now, rather than not going at all.

And that would have been a nice little beautiful moment as it was, but then there was one other kid from one of the other groups that we were having lunch with who said "Yeah! I hate the Catholic church."

Oooh. Okay. This took a bit of a turn. Now we're in a different world. Right? And then they proceeded to say a series of sentences that began with Catholics are always – blank and they're always – blank. And it just kept going and going. I'm like, we have Catholics and Presbyterians and Lutherans and that person had had a bad experience. Okay? And then it turned into this type of verbalization. So, I just jumped in and said "Hey! Hey! Hold on! I've got a question for everybody." And they all stopped and looked at me and I said, "Who likes chocolate ice cream?" Almost all of them raised their hand. Then I said "Okay. Who really doesn't like chocolate ice cream?" And one person raised their hand, and I thought, thank you Holy Spirit for this because this is going to work out well, because it was that person who was talking about Catholics.

I said "Hey everybody. She doesn't like chocolate ice cream. Does that make her evil?"

"No."

"Does it make her bad?"

"No."

"Is she wrong?" One kid went "kinda".

I said, "OK. Look the Catholic church is like chocolate ice cream. Right? Somebody's gonna like that flavor. Somebody isn't. I'm Presbyterian and we're

like the Rocky Road of ice cream. You know? We're a little sweet but there's definitely some nuts in there."

But there is no reason to hate here. There's no reason to divide. We can simply celebrate that we all call upon Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and it might come in different ways. And somebody needs the kind of church where there is a cross that comes down and there is incense flowing and there's a confessional and they need that. Thanks be to God that we have that for them. There's somebody who needs whatever this vibe is we have here. There's somebody who needs what Chip grew up with, right? And a lot more of those Amens and Halleluiahs and people praying out loud and thanks be to God we have that.

But these differences that we have approaching God and connecting with God should never become the kind of thing that causes us to turn on one another. We don't need to limit that argument with religions and denominations, it goes for all the other things in our lives. We divide on such little things and sometimes when we divide on things we're dividing based on the brokenness of this world. But we're meant to overcome that brokenness with what? What love! Most often expressed, most powerfully expressed in the form of forgiveness. Forgiving someone who is speaking out of anger, out of fear, out of worry. Forgiving someone who is taking action out of their own insecurity, just pouring out forgiveness into this world. This is what we are meant to do.

Every week we have this prayer, this Lord's Prayer. *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* or as some churches say, forgive us our sins as we forgive others' sins or trespasses. Look, that's God, I want you to forgive me the same way I forgive other people. You realize you've been saying that every Sunday. God forgive me the way I forgive other people. You better hope God's not listening to that part of the prayer. We should probably amend the Lord's Prayer. It probably should say, Lord please forgive me better than I forgive other people.

This is the place where we can make such an impression in this world. We can't dial back so many of the wrongs and the brokenness of the world, but one thing we can do is pour out forgiveness and pour out grace to others so that every person that walks into this church has an experience like Chip had of feeling that welcoming feeling, that warmth and feeling that this is a place where God's love is gonna be shared and maybe this is a place where your faith can grow. And then when they run into us out there in the rest of the world, we're the ones that are pouring out love and forgiveness, that's the witness of seeing.

The world does not need you to be the judge of good and evil. It actually doesn't need you to be the judge of even right and wrong as much as you think it does. What this world needs from you is love and with that the world can come to know God. Let's go show 'em what God's about. Let's go show 'em love.

To God be the glory.

Halleluiah and Amen.