

*The Good News Is...Love Much* – Matt. 25:36-50, Luke 7:36-50

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The Good News of Jesus' ministry last week was that it sometimes catches us by surprise. Our job is to plant seeds and trust that God will do something amazing and even surprising with what we plant.

Today, the Good News of Jesus' ministry that we're focusing on is that we are called to love greatly. And when we love others greatly, we also love Jesus greatly. That was behind Jesus' words in Matthew 25—"when you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

And it's also true of what we see from this woman who brought extravagant gifts to Jesus in Luke 7. Her gifts of expensive ointment for his feet, and the tears that came with it, along with the drying of his feet with her hair, conveyed to Jesus a deep love that he hadn't found from Simon his host.

We explicitly here at FPC make loving God and loving others part of our mission. (Love and Learn has become the tagline for who we are at FPC.) We talk about it a lot.

Because we talk about it, though, and because its message is as straightforward as any message of the Gospel could be, we still find it as difficult as any mission of our faith to carry out.

We love God and others, of course, in response to God's love for us—indeed, for God so loved the world that he gave us God's Son.

And yet, we love God and neighbor not only because it's our mandate, but also because there is goodness in loving. There is a benefit we receive when we love. And it's true in any

circumstance of life. We receive goodness when we love others in our best moments but also in our most difficult moments.

Back in 1998, I read a book called, *Happiness Is A Serious Problem*, by Jewish commentator and author Dennis Prager.

It stressed two important insights: First, happiness isn't to be awaited but must be pursued. Second, expectations are a major impediment to happiness. They undermine the greatest source of happiness: gratitude.

The more you expect, the less grateful you will be for what you have; the less you expect, the more grateful. So, while we shouldn't have any reason to not be prosperous today, we shouldn't expect to be. Something can go wrong at any moment. And so, we should be grateful every day. And when we're grateful, we're loving toward God and others.

Dennis Prager, in recent years, found himself personally challenged by his own theory. On Nov. 12, 2024, he had a catastrophic fall at home, which left him paralyzed from the shoulders down. The doctor at the hospital told his wife and son that he should be put on palliative care to make his final days as painless as possible. Truth be told, the fall should have killed him.

"Tested as they were, none of my views on happiness changed. They enabled me to forestall depression. I still believe happiness isn't to be awaited but must be pursued. And because I have almost no expectations, I am not battling traumatic disappointment. I've experienced considerable pain, both physical and emotional.

"I've gone from broadcasting a daily radio show, writing a weekly column, flying to deliver at least one lecture a week to a bedridden life. These monumental changes arrived in a split second, and I've replayed the fall in my mind countless times.

“My condition has reinforced what matters most in my life: my wife, children and grandchildren, my friends, my mind and my mission to deliver ideas that better people’s lives. Why haven’t my views on happiness changed? Because I’ve never believed happiness is solely a function of what happens to us. Catastrophic events will affect us. But even in dire circumstances, we can and should pursue happiness.” (Wall Street Journal, February 27, 2026)

I think that when we love God and others, we’re pursuing happiness. We’re seeking something better — no matter our circumstance.

And that ability to love God and others is indeed centered in gratitude.

Consider the woman that came to Simon’s house on this day in Luke--impertinent and audacious, an unsolicited sex worker, having heard that the great teacher is in Simon’s house, invades the space. Immediately, the Pharisee, a man tasked with conveying God’s love to God’s people, distances himself from her. From his perspective, the love in which she traffics, commercially but not virtuously intimate, prohibits her presence. But Jesus graciously allows her to draw near. When she is close, ironically, she offers Jesus the hospitality that Simon had neglected. She washes. She anoints. She kisses his feet.

Despite her gender, despite her occupation, she seeks to practice her love for Jesus. And in doing so, her status, her past, her mistakes all take a backseat to what she seeks — a better place in her life, happiness even.

And it comes from her seeking it, from her intentionally choosing to love

Jesus is so impressed that he loves her with an extravagant grace that cancels all her sins.

This woman carried the weight of all that burdened her and still found a better life, a life freed of her sin. All because she took steps to seek it out. She took steps to love.

As it is difficult to take action to love the God who made us, it's also doubly hard maybe to love those we consider unlovable. Similarly, though, we have a choice. We can harbor our resentment, our feelings of betrayal, our disagreement with their misplaced priorities, or we can act to love, we can seek out happiness still in the act of loving others.

G.K. Chesterton once said, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."

Yeah, we don't often call the people we know well or love already our neighbors. They are our friends or our spouses or our beloved siblings. Our neighbors are usually those we don't know and aren't drawn to because we don't have much in common with them.

And yet, of course, we have much in common. Together we yearn for the same things: happiness and joy, a better life, peace, prosperity. We sometimes just don't know how to go about finding it.

We should lean toward doing something to find a way. Because our love for our neighbor is indeed a way for all of us to find a better life—happiness if you will.

There's an old story of a farmer who was renowned for his high-quality corn, which often won a blue ribbon at the county fair. A newspaper reporter interviewed him to learn what made him such a consistent winner.

The reporter was surprised to hear the farmer say that he often shared seed corn with his neighbors. “How can you afford to do that?” the reporter asked. “Aren’t you in competition with them for the blue ribbon each year?”

“Of course I am,” said the farmer. “But you have to understand something about growing corn. The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and carries it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. The only way for me to grow good corn is to help my neighbors do the same.”

The love and welfare of our neighbor increases the odds of our own welfare.

There is goodness in loving. There is goodness when we try to bring our best to God to reflect the gratitude that should always be at the forefront of our living. And there is goodness when the love we have for our neighbors—friends as well as enemies—improves someone else’s lives in addition to our own.

Dennis Prager, the writer and speaker, said following his severe fall that has left him mostly paralyzed, “From the day I regained consciousness, I realized I had only three alternatives: death, depression or perseverance. Since I don’t want to die and I don’t want to be depressed, my choice is obvious. I will continue enjoying [my work], my family, and my friends.”

The choice to love, the decision to love. It is filled with goodness.