

# “The Circle of Our Belonging”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins

to the congregation at

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

July 10, 2016

**Scripture: Luke 10: 25 - 37**

It's not easy to be a preacher these days. Last Tuesday at our worship planning meeting, I described how the sermon this Sunday would be about the ten refugees that were chosen by the International Olympic Committee to compete together as a team at the Rio Olympics. It's an amazing story that I thought would make for a great sermon illustration. These refugees, belonging to *no* country, belong to all of us, I thought. I decided to call the sermon, “The Circle of our Belonging”.

But already that morning Alton Sterling had been killed by police in Baton Rouge. And by Wednesday night, Philandro Castile was dead outside of St. Paul. And I began to wonder how exactly I was going to weave these two terrible incidents into a message about refugees and the Olympics.

I wrote half a sermon on Thursday, still thinking I could make it all work. And then Thursday night, at a peaceful protest march for those two shootings, five police officers were gunned down, and seven others injured by a sniper in Dallas. Friday morning, I knew there was no reason to even open my half written draft. I just clicked ‘new document’ and started over. It's not easy to be a preacher these days.

But something it's *really* not easy being these days – is a police officer. Sworn to protect and serve, the vast majority wake up every day ready to do an incredibly dangerous job, sometimes forced to make split- second decisions about life and death. I can't *imagine* the kind of stress they live with.

And something else it's really not easy being these days – is black in America. Waking up every day knowing that the color of your skin puts you at greater risk of prejudice, harassment, and maybe even dying. I can't imagine living with the injustice of it.

After the sniper attack on Thursday night, the Dallas Chief of Police said, 'We're hurting.' He had in mind police officers, but he could have been speaking about any number of communities in our country: communities of color, or the LGBT community, or the white working class...or really just about any of us. As a country, we're hurting right now. And the signs of strain and stress are everywhere.

This presidential election has brought out the worst in us. Orlando has again reminded us that we seem unable to stop anyone deranged enough to make their point with an automatic weapon. And too many in our country feel left out, targeted, and voiceless.

Tensions are so high, and the public discourse so polarized, that almost everything we read or hear feels loaded. For example, I'll bet even my few comments already this morning have likely evoked that part of you now trained to ask what angle I'm taking; part of your brain is trying to figure out whose side I'm really on.

There's not a lot of middle ground these days. Not a lot of nuance or benefit of the doubt. It's like when we get into an argument with our partner – once we feel attacked and become defensive, there's not much chance of really hearing each other. Best to take a break. Go for a walk. Clear our head.

We're a country that needs to clear its head. We need to take walk around the block. But that's pretty hard to do when we keep bouncing from tragedy to tragedy. And in this hyper-media culture, each heartbreak is followed by a spiral of accusation and political spin which just draw us further and further into our insulated bunkers of 'us vs. them.' Surrounded only by those who share our perspective, we begin to distort and demonize the 'others'.

'Us vs. Them' is something Jesus talked about a lot. Today's story of the Good Samaritan, may at first seem tired to those of us who've grown up hearing it. But given this past week, it strikes me as important and relevant as ever. Just substitute the characters, and the whole thing comes alive again.

Instead of a Jew, imagine it's a police officer lying in the ditch. And instead of the Samaritan, maybe a black man comes to help. Or maybe it's a black woman lying hurt in the ditch and a homeless man comes to help. Or maybe it's a Muslim. Or a lesbian. Or a republican. Maybe it's a republican, lesbian, Muslim...

Whatever messes with the categories you've imposed on the world is what Jesus has in mind, because he was trying to remind those around him that before we're anything else, we're just human. And a 'Samaritan' by any name we give it, is no less a child of God than you or me.

There are no easy answers for what's happening in our country. It's taken a long time to get here, and a lot of mistakes and hatred that have caused a lot of hurt, on all sides. But we're getting close enough to the edge of the cliff that collectively we've got to start slowly backing away. How do we do that?

As I thought about this, I decided my original sermon title actually still works pretty well this morning. Because this is all about the circle of our belonging. This is about who we think belongs to us, and who we think doesn't. And if you remember one thing, one phrase from today, I hope you'll hear me challenging you to **widen the circle of your belonging**.

At a practical level, this means picking the group that you don't 'get', the group you fundamentally disagree with, and REALLY trying to listen to what's at stake for them. Democrats really trying to understand the republican perspective. Whites really trying to appreciate the black experience. African Americans really listening to the experience of being a police officer.

And not because it's a way of getting to who's right and who's wrong. We're not there yet. We need to start by just sitting down with people who are different from us with an open heart and really listening - just as an act of care. Just as a way of remembering that we belong to each other.

And *if* we do this, let's go ahead and tell the truth: it's not always going to go well. It's not always going to end with kumbaya. It's mostly going to be hard work. Sometimes it will be tender and beautiful and poignant. But sometimes it's going to be uncomfortable, and heated and painful. It took a lot to get us to this point. It's going to take a lot to move beyond it.

So let's get really practical. If you want to be a part of the effort to change the direction things are going, then I want to ask you to be here in six weeks, on Sunday, August 21<sup>st</sup> when Rev. Tawana Davis and Rev. Dawn Duval will preach that morning, and after church we'll have a workshop from 11 to 1. The details are in your bulletin.

And we'll start talking about these things. We'll start having some courageous conversation about race, about privilege, and about widening the circle of our belonging.

The big challenge for a lot of us at Montview is not that we don't care about these things. We feel deeply troubled when we watch those videos. We feel frightened for ourselves and our country when we see the violence escalating. But in a week or two, when things start to settle down, and the news has moved on to something else, it's going to be very easy to get drawn back into the demands of the kids and the email and all the other stuff that already filled our lives. Until the next shooting happens.

To truly change things, is going to require a *sustained* response. It's going to require us to show up, and show up, and just keep showing up. Because showing up is an act of courage, and an act of love, and an act of resisting this culture of violence and death.

And if you're thinking that you don't know where to show up; that these problems, while terrible, seem too big and too far away for you to know what to do about it...well, I'm going to make you a promise today.

I promise that over the next year this church is going to make it really hard for you to say you don't know what you can do about it. The workshop on August 21<sup>st</sup> is a beginning, not an end. We've been busy dreaming up all kinds of possibilities. And I bet you can help us dream up even more.

What if, like someone suggested recently, we started a Bible Study with Shorter AME Church down the street. And for a year, 10 people from Shorter and 10 people from Montview met to discuss what the words of Jesus mean to them.

What if a team from Montview joined a team from New Hope Baptist and worked with police to make our communities safer?

What if we started small group discussions around a book that helped us to better understand the experience of someone of color?

What if we expanded the tutoring programs and other volunteer opportunities we have to connect us with our neighbors in northeast Park Hill?

What if we created a safe space to talk honestly about our own conscious and unconscious racism?

What if we had a choir concert with some area churches and let music connect us the way only music can?

These are just a few of the possibilities. Will they stop the next tragedy from happening? No, sadly, they won't. But they might stop a tragedy from happening around here. Will they make a difference in the big picture? Not much of one. But they'll make a *huge* difference in the lives of those involved. And after the week this country has had...I'll take that. I'll take that.

Remember, the Samaritan didn't solve the world's problems. He was just the one who was willing to cross the road, and reach out in compassion to the person on the other side.

He was the one willing to *widen* the circle...of his belonging.