

The Edge of Love

Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-2

Matthew 22:34-40

Webster defines edge as “The outside limit of an object, area, or surface; a place or part farthest away from the center of something.” as a verb it means to move gradually, carefully, or furtively in a particular direction. Finding the edge means stepping outside of your comfort zone, and allowing yourself to explore and grow physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. So often we seem to engage in numbing behaviors, ways to take the edge off, talk ourselves back from the edge so to speak. Anxiety has been escalating steadily in schools even before the pandemic but now it seems to have reached a point where people are really on edge, trust is low, and we just want to find our safe zone, maybe through a Netflix binge, internet games, a batch of cookies, the drug of choice, pick your poison we all seem to have something to take us as quickly as we can to a more comfortable state of distraction.

Sometimes is it possible we rush too quickly out of these areas of discomfort that we miss an opportunity for deeper growth, maybe even deeper satisfaction by lingering there a moment to just pay attention, not to overthink or even try and process. When we are sensing that edge it's probably not when we are ready to process but just be present with ourselves. I am on the receiving end of this message for sure. I reach for my phone without thinking, or the remote, or something in the pantry just magically appears in my hand. It's effortless.

While we will not find much use of social media in the Bible we do see many times where God calls people to serve who would just as soon move directly out of the discomfort zone and back to what's familiar. Moses was more of a loner, separated early on from his biological family and raised as an Egyptian prince, then called to lead. He was named and raised by a Pharaoh's daughter as an Egyptian prince and then called to lead the very people his family had enslaved. He was born an outsider and ultimately died alone in an unknown grave outside the

promised land he had been seeking for so many years. The outcome of his life when looked at separately might look like the ultimate failure, but the process of his life, his actions, his faith, his obedience to God changed a nation, changed history, and his legacy is one of the greatest Biblical heroes. In the course of stories, the end of his life only emphasized his message, which pointed the people to God, not himself.

When Jesus reveals the greatest commandment He refers back to the Hebrew scriptures and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The meaning of love here is not just a feeling but an action. The way it was written in the Hebrew scriptures originally was to be helpful and to benefit the other person. I find that comforting in a sense. I mean I can grill ya up a burger or rake your yard and be fine with it and maybe as we serve and benefit the feeling will come but I find hope it's more important to benefit people than like them. The pastor at Hope Lutheran shared a story of a time they found out some anti abortion radical group was coming to picket outside their church and his original feeling was anger and wanting to do something aggressive in return. After further thought he decided to gather the most meek in the Biblical sense, the most non violent most level headed of the congregation to form a committee and make a decision. It was during the pandemic and they were not able to cook or bake anything but they loaded up on prepackaged snacks and drinks and set up tables to serve them and that is just what they did. We can at least feed you and keep you hydrated while you walk around and shout. When they later wrote about it in their newsletter they were confused and didn't know what to make of it. It smacks of turning the other cheek and it also gives the hand and mind something to do besides talk and argue or agree or apologize.

A professor in one of my first classes in seminary said this passage is the heart of the gospel for him. He had been married a long time to a Jewish woman he loved very much and this passage spoke to both of them. I could see in a sense how this could inform pretty much everything and the rest of the Bible expands on how to do this. Just when we think we have come to the edge of this task it's like that extra slide in an RV that pops out and makes a whole

extra room or even the suitcase with the extra zipper. Just when you think it's full and it can't budge one more inch you unzip that and there is just a little more wiggle room to expand. That is how it has worked for me. If it's truth it expands and opens the heart and the mind and makes room for new people, new thinking, bigger ideas.

One of the necessary prerequisites is a little self reflection or a lot depending on the level of discomfort. I do a lot of driving these days for work and I find it really exciting to discover new podcasts and authors to listen to on audibles. One is hosted by Richard Rohr and the Center for Action and Contemplation or CAC. He has compiled a list of personal biases we all tend to have. They all start with C and he has found more than he has written but I will just highlight a few.

Comfort Bias - I prefer not to have my comfort disturbed

Conservative/Liberal Bias - I lean toward nurturing fairness and kindness, or towards strictly enforcing purity, loyalty, liberty, and authority, and keeping the status quo as an expression of my political identity

Confidence Bias- I often prefer the bold lie to the hesitant truth

Contact Bias- When I don't have intense and sustained personal contact with "the other" my prejudices and false assumptions go unchallenged

Conspiracy Bias- Under stress or shame, our brains are attracted to stories that relieve us, exonerate us, or portray us as innocent victims of malicious conspirators.

Richard: "I don't know any other way to be free of all these biases except through the contemplative mind. I see almost every one of them within myself - at least at some point in my life. I also believe there are enough good-willed people out there who, if presented with a list of these biases, have the freedom to investigate, "How can I let go of that? How can I move beyond that?"

The last aspect I want to explore is how suffering plays in to times of discomfort, those times we feel alone in the wilderness, lost in grief and impermanence and how to respond. To expand

and grow in love over a lifetime and do it faithfully and purposefully it should include some discomfort, probably some heart ache and inevitable some losses that will lead to some suffering. Love will rarely lead down the path of least resistance. Our culture would often prefer to look at measurable results and wins and things like dying to live or losing yourself in order to gain connection to something bigger just don't get the most recognition and praise. It's unfortunate because willingness to be vulnerable is the bravest act. Sometimes through suffering we learn the biggest lessons about what is most important and in unspeakable ways it brings out the highest versions of people.

I found out a family we knew well during our time in Estherville moved to Texas. I was not aware what town until not long ago when I realized it was a town west of San Antonio called Uvalde. The middle school girl who used to babysit our kids is the assistant principal of Robb elementary. I cannot imagine the unspeakable suffering that community has been through.

I Susan Cain's book "Bittersweet, How Sorrow and Sadness Make us Whole," she talks about sorrow as something that awakens the longing that is spoken about in all the world religions. As we are born we take our first journey away from communion with God. We forget we ever had a divine connection. Then we remember and spend the rest of our lives trying to get back, finding transcendence occasionally and wanting to stay as long as we can like Moses on the mountain. She then says we need to take whatever pain we can't get rid of and make it our creative offering. I heard a story of someone in Uvalde going through the coffee drive through and the barista says Good morning, are you taking care of yourself? She said I think so, how about you. The barista said well, I normally work in San Antonio but I am working here for a few weeks so the local workers can have time off to grieve. That's just as beautiful as the stories in Sarajevo or Ukraine where musicians play violin music in the streets while bombs are going off and literally things falling down around them. When Beethoven composed Ode to Joy he was already deaf. When it was first performed he had no idea the crowd had gone silent. When

someone turned him around the crowd was on their feet crying and waving handkerchiefs. As beautiful as it was they could hear the profound sorrow which only made it more beautiful and they were able to experience both simultaneously and were moved to tears.

Love is always moving somewhere, rarely in a straight line. Sometimes seemingly dried up or absent but like a river it is always flowing. So we just gave to keep creating, in the sorrow and through the sorrow, however furtively and carefully. Like a mother eagle pushing us forward and carrying us to safety, God will be there always too.