What Bold Love Actually Looks Like

So we have three texts(Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34–40). And they all converge on the same center. But the question that kept pressing on me at the Alaska Annual Conference two weeks ago — the question I brought back home with me and have not been able to set down — is not just what love is. It is what it looks like to love boldly. In this moment. In this place. Under this kind of pressure.

Let me offer four reflections that have come into focus for me since conference. I do not think of these as my own insights so much as things that have been unlocked for me by sitting with the scripture and by the preaching and conversation of these past two weeks.

The first reflection is about what boldness actually is.

We tend to imagine boldness as volume. As the personality that fills the room. But the Greek word the New Testament uses for boldness is Parrhesia (παρρησία). It appears throughout the book of Acts, and it is the very word the early disciples pray for after Peter and John are arrested in Acts 4. When the whole community gathers in that moment — not just the leaders, but everyone — and prays for courage, they are asking for Parrhesia (παρρησία).

Parrhesia (παρρησία) means frankness. Openness. The freedom to speak plainly. The courage to tell the truth. And here is the detail that stopped me when I looked this up: Parrhesia (παρρησία) is a feminine noun. In Greek grammatical gender, boldness is feminine. Biblical boldness is not the boldness of the powerful imposing their will on others. It is the boldness of the truthful, speaking clearly in the presence of God. It is the courage to be honest, to be direct, to say what is real, to refuse to hide.

Moses has Parrhesia (παρρησία) when he speaks the Shema to a people who might prefer comfortable vagueness about who they are. Jesus has Parrhesia (παρρησία) when he answers plainly in the middle of a trap. The community in Acts 4 receives Parrhesia (παρρησία) after they pray — and the place shakes. That is what happens when ordinary people, gathered in the name of God, stop hedging and start speaking the truth.

And notice this: in Acts 4, Parrhesia (παρρησία) is not given to the leaders alone. It is not the special possession of Peter and John. The whole community prays. The whole community is filled. The whole community begins to speak. Boldness has never been the property of a few heroic figures. It has always been the inheritance of the gathered people of God — which means it belongs to this congregation, in Girdwood, right now.

The second reflection is about what kind of love we are talking about.

We have already seen that ahav — the love in the Shema — is covenantal, not emotional. It is about loyalty, orientation, faithfulness in action. The Greek word for this kind of love — the word the New Testament reaches for when it talks about the love that God has for the world, and the love we are called to extend to our neighbors — is agape.

Agape is not primarily a feeling. It is a choice. A commitment. A decision about what to move toward, what to value, what to stay in relationship with even when the feeling has gone quiet. Agape is the love that stays at the table when the conversation gets difficult. It is the love that keeps showing up when it would be easier to stay home. It is the love that tells the truth when a comfortable silence would be easier.

This is why Leviticus 19:18 begins where it does — with vengeance and grudges. Because the situation God is addressing is one where love is hard. Something has happened. There is wound, there is grievance, there is reason to pull away. And God says: do not let that wound become the organizing principle of your life. Do not let the grudge define you. Choose, instead, to extend to your neighbor the same active care you extend to yourself.

This is demanding. Anyone who has tried it knows how demanding it is. But it is also, I think, the most realistic account of love there is. It does not ask us to manufacture feelings we do not have. It asks us to make a choice about how we will act, regardless of what we feel. And sometimes, when we make that choice and act from it, the feeling follows. Not always. But sometimes.

The third reflection is about who counts as neighbor.

Jesus' pairing of the Shema with Leviticus 19:18 begins a movement that reaches its fullest expression in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is my neighbor? The expert in the law asks that question hoping to limit the answer. And Jesus refuses to limit it. The neighbor is not the person you chose, the person who belongs to your group, the person who makes it easy to love them. The neighbor is the person in front of you. The one with need. The one outside your usual circle of care.

In Leviticus, the neighbor was a fellow Israelite. By the time we get to Jesus, the neighbor is a Samaritan stranger on a road. And by the time we get to us, here in Girdwood in 2026 — the neighbor is whoever is near.

Think about who is near us. Seasonal workers who move through this valley and never quite find a place to belong. People who struggle with deep isolation through the long, dark months of winter, and whose loneliness is hidden underneath busyness. Families under financial pressure in a place where the cost of living has become crushing. People who have been wounded by churches before and are watching from a careful distance to see if we are different from what they experienced.

None of them fit neatly into any church growth strategy. But all of them fit the heart of God. And if we cannot see them — if we are so organized around the people already in the room that we have stopped looking toward the door — then the question is not what is wrong with them. The question, the honest Parrhesia (παρρησία) question, is what has happened to our vision.

The fourth reflection is about what we are answering to.

Jesus, in Matthew 22, is asked to help the religious experts sort out their system. He refuses. He does not help them rank their rules. He goes beneath all of it to the reason the

rules existed in the first place. And then he invites every subsequent generation — including ours — to let the same question reorganize their lives. What are we answering to? Does it answer to love?

We can answer to nostalgia — to a version of church that felt right and familiar, a way of doing things that worked in another era and that we keep reaching for even when it no longer fits. We can answer to anxiety — the fear of shrinking, the fear of running out, the fear that if we change anything we will lose what little we have left. We can answer to habits that no longer produce life — things we keep doing simply because we have always done them, long past the season when they were fruitful.

Jesus does not condemn us for any of this. He simply calls us back. Come back to the center. Come back to the two things that were always the point. Come back to love. And then — with the Parrhesia (παρρησία) the Spirit gives — speak the truth about what answering to love will actually require of us.

This is where bold love gets concrete. It means being willing to ask: what do we need to stop doing so that we have energy for what love actually requires? What has become a burden we carry out of guilt rather than a gift we offer out of faithfulness? What new thing is love calling us toward that we have been afraid to name out loud?