

Sermon *Vampires Are Real*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 10.29.23

In seminary, my professor stood before us on the day before Halloween and began her lecture with this, “Vampires are real.” We all kind-of snickered but she had a serious look on her face. Reading the room, she said, “I’m serious, vampires are real.”

I started to wonder if I took the right class, or even if I was in the right seminary. My graduate school is a part of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. There are eight-member seminaries – Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Jesuit, Episcopal, Jewish, Unitarian – all within an academic partnership with the graduate department at the University of California at Berkeley. We can, and are encouraged to, take classes from other seminaries as well as at Cal. The class I was in was Health and Healing from Starr King School for Ministry which is Unitarian. As it turned out, this was one of the most important classes I took – there are precepts, practices and methods I have used through my entire ministry. The benefit of taking a health and healing class from the Unitarian seminary is that they incorporate healing arts from all over the world and a variety of religions. Our professor’s main task was to highlight what was effective, not what would fit into a narrow Christian orthodox view. However, with her assertion that vampires are real, I started to worry that I had taken this whole thing a little too far and that perhaps I should have studied healing at the Jesuit school.

She asked, “How many of you are going into pastoral ministry?” All of us raised our hands (the GTU at Berkeley is well-known for their academia; many students are there to learn and write but not necessarily to become a pastor). She said, “Good, then all of you will find out, sooner or later, that pastoral vampires exist – they are people who will suck the life out of you if given the chance.” I had already experienced someone like this – a pastoral vampire – and suddenly felt that I was in the right place at the right time.

Have you ever met someone who when they walk into a room, it seems a little darker? That when you talk to that person that you start to feel drained; more negative; hopeless? I have experienced them. They are out there and it helps to call them vampires.

Some believe that the ancient mythological writing about vampires come from the Jewish belief system – highlighted in the Book of Leviticus – that blood contains the life force of an animal and a person. If you are familiar with kosher food, the way that it is harvested and prepared, that the blood is drained out. The ancient writing about vampires is the metaphorical sense that someone can drain your life force out in order for them to have energy. And, once someone has been bitten by a vampire – once someone has been drained – they then need to feed on others to get energy. Again, this is what I have experienced with pastoral vampires. They suck the life out of someone and then that person, turning negative, has to take positive energy from others to feel a sense of balance.

The professor then asked us if the opposite of a vampire exists? Have you met someone that brings you energy? Do you know someone that when they walk into the room, it feels lighter? Have you met with someone that brings you a sense of joy and peace and strength? Yes, I have met them and I certainly enjoy spending time with them. How about this: have you walked into a place that brings you peace and joy and energy? I believe the campus of All Angels is such a place. There is very good, almost tangible energy here – positive energy that fuels people along their journey. There is also a sense of joy and of peace on this campus.

I bring this up because we have the Gospel lesson, which many could say by memory – *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself*. What if your neighbor is a vampire? How can you love your neighbor who sucks the life out of you? Should you love that person?

For our Epistle reading, we read from the third book of the Old Testament, Leviticus. It is here that (many believe) Jesus was quoting with *love your neighbor as yourself*. Did you notice, however, that the quote said “as much as you love yourself”. This brings in a wonderful question: can you love someone more than you love yourself? Can you love God if you do not love yourself? Can you love another if you do not carry love for yourself in your heart? Many sociologists and psychologists believe the answer to those questions is no.

I knew someone who cared for abandoned animals. This person believed that the neglectful owners simply did not love themselves and therefore could not love their pets. She hoped that all people would love themselves so they could then love all species and humans. And yes, she was one of those people who bring joy and energy to a room.

We are commanded to love God and love others. Does God have to command that we also love ourselves? Probably not, but it’s nice to hear it once in a while so I’ll say it: you need to show love for yourself. In airplanes, you all have seen the presentation about what to do if the cabin loses air pressure – first you (say it with me) put your mask on and then help the person next to you. Maybe that’s how love works too. We need to first love ourselves and then reach out in love to someone else.

Once we have love in our own heart, let’s take a look at how love is defined for your neighbor in Leviticus. I say that love is defined by Leviticus because today’s passage is wrapped up with the phrase, “Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” It’s not a laundry list in which love happens to be mentioned; no, it is a demonstration, a showing and telling, of what love is with our neighbors. Let’s start at the top. With regards to your fields, do not harvest everything all the way to the edges, instead, leave some produce for the poor and the immigrant; I am the Lord. You must not steal, deceive, or lie, or swear falsely by my name, do not oppress or rob your neighbors, do not withhold a hired laborer’s pay overnight, do not insult a deaf person or place an obstacle in front of a blind person; instead, respect the Lord your God. Be fair, no matter who is on trial — do not favor either the poor or the rich. Do not be a gossip, but never hesitate to speak up in court, especially if your testimony can save someone's life. Do not hold grudges. On

the other hand, it is wrong not to correct someone who needs correcting. Do not be angry or try to take revenge. I am the Lord, and I command you to love others as much as you love yourself.

What do you read from this section? I read that loving one's neighbor is tricky. Do not hold grudges; on the other hand, it is wrong not to correct someone who needs correcting. Do not gossip but do speak up in court to help someone. Loving is not easy, or clear cut, and loving one's neighbor involves boundaries. Boundary number one – you cannot, or should not, love them more than you love yourself; the first boundary is loving as much as you love yourself. If you do something nice for your neighbor, also do something nice for yourself. If you cut some slack for your neighbor, also try cutting some slack for yourself too. The same too goes for forgiveness – forgive others; also forgive yourself.

Boundary number two: correcting. Don't hold grudges (as in, don't bottle up your feelings inside which can turn into a grudge or resentment), let things go – speak them out and get it out from inside. On the other hand, if someone needs correcting, it is wrong not to do so; and, for yourself, if you need correcting, loving yourself is hearing what needs to be corrected and then doing it.

Boundary number three: loving your neighbor means to help the poor, the immigrant, the blind and the deaf. Leave some of your harvest for others, don't make fun of people for their conditions – even if they can't hear or see it. Likewise, leave something for yourself and don't self-deprecate for the things you cannot do well (the areas in which you are blind or deaf).

Should you love your neighbor who is a vampire? If so, how? First, I need to point out that there is more here than what I can address in this message. If you would like more information, please know I am available to hear your pastoral concerns; especially about a vampire in your life; and how to protect your energy and perhaps even help change the energy of the other person.

If there is someone who sucks the life out of you, that includes draining the love from your heart. God does not want us to be in those types of relationships; at least not for very long. For some reason, God has kept putting the occasional vampire in my life; I have learned, however, that is because I needed to experience it and learn from it (and in one case, change the other person which also meant changing myself). Give yourself boundaries with that person – set a short time, a specific place, and then stick with the plan. Also, be sure to have a person, or a place, or an event that gives you energy and plan to spend time there to reenergize; and then stick with the plan.

The ultimate anti-vampire for me is God through the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit where I draw peace, energy, strength, knowledge and joy. I believe that if the Holy Spirit were to fully materialize in front of us, right now, for just 1/10th of a second, we'd have enough energy from that experience to last all year. Both Moses and Jesus (in his earthly body) were literally beaming when they were in the presence of God the Holy Spirit. That presence, that energy and joy and light and power and peace is all available to us through prayer at any time and in any place.

If you find yourself in the presence of a vampire, starting praying to God, start praising God. For me, my go-to practice is to sing – either out loud or internally – the Sanctus (*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory, hosanna in the highest*). That connection; the reliance; on God is what brings joy and peace. God loves me more than I love myself; way more than I love myself. That source of divine love also brings energy and will help us not only to deal with the occasional vampire, that love will also help us love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.