

February 24, 2019
Irving Park Lutheran Church
Sermon Preached by Seminary Student Bristol Reading on Luke 6:27-38

The What, Who, and Why of Love

I like ethics. I like ethics enough that I got a whole *degree* in the subject. I *enjoy* considering ethical scenarios that push us to ask not just *what* the right action is in a certain situation, but *why* the right action is indeed *right*.

Now, I've been going to the adult forum this spring, and we're in the midst of a series on Christian ethics, so I know some of you out there *also* like to dissect particularly thorny ethical situations, to debate a moral question from different points of view.

So the Gospel text this morning is right up our alley because it dives head first into some serious ethical questions about relationships. And this passage is a teaching from Jesus, from the middle of one of his own sermons!

So it's definitely worth our time to explore *what*, exactly, we're supposed to be doing, for *whom* we're doing it, and *why* it's the right thing to do.

The answer to that first question - *what* is Jesus teaching us to *do*? - seems pretty simple: love. It's the first word of Jesus' teaching: "I say to you that listen, *love* and *do good*..."

Seems simple... but what does it actually *mean* to *love*?

You may have heard that not all loves are created equal in the New Testament. Greek has a few different words that get translated into the English word "love," and each one carries a slightly different connotation. This word here, in "love and do good," is the word *agape*. It's a powerful kind of love, often described as "unconditional."

In that sense it's different than another kind of love, *philia*, which is closer to affection, a closeness to those for whom you feel fond. *Philia*, for instance, is the kind of love I have with my group of college girlfriends. We get together for a weekend every year because we still like each other; we have things in common; we enjoy each other's company. That's *philia* love.

But there's another kind of love that comes when the affectionate fondness of *philia* runs out. Have you ever chosen to love someone even when you didn't feel very fond of them at the time?

You may have gotten a taste of this kind of love if you were stuck inside your house for days on end during the polar vortex with your family... That's more like *agape* love.

No, but in all seriousness, there's a difference between the kind of love we have for people we *feel* loving towards, and the kind of love we commit to maintaining for someone even when we *don't* feel loving towards them.

To love someone with an agape love is to love them with intentionality whether or not they deserve it. That is how Jesus says we are to love: by *choice*, with *commitment*, regardless of our *feelings*.

This is what Jesus is telling us to *do*. The rest of the verbs in the passage follow suit. They are the kind of intentional actions that result from the commitment to act with agape. We don't just *love*, we do good, we bless, we give, we offer, we lend, we forgive.

This is not a sentimental kind of love, but an active love that results in concrete care for others within the community.

Now, when it comes to the recipients of this great, unconditional agape love, the ethics of this Gospel message get a little less comfortable. Jesus says that we are to love: our enemies, those who hate us, those who curse us, those who take from us, those who judge us and condemn us.

This isn't about loving the people who are easy to love, the people you get along with. Anybody can do that, Jesus says. This is about loving the people who are anything *but loving* towards you.

This is a key to what makes the kind of Gospel living Jesus advocates different from the kind of living that the surrounding culture advocates. In Jesus' day, reciprocity was a guiding principle for personal and communal interactions: you were right to treat people the way they treated you. After all, doesn't the Bible say "an eye for an eye"? The prevailing culture around Jesus – not unlike the prevailing culture around *us* – said that you should be good and generous to those who treat you well – your family, your tribe, *your* people.

The culture may say that's enough, but Jesus sets a higher standard, *beyond* reciprocity. You don't just have to love the people who are your tribe, *your* people, You *also* have to love the people who have done *nothing* for you, like strangers or foreigners. You *also* have to love the people who *cannot repay* your generosity, like beggars or children. You *even* have to love the people who have *actively harmed or opposed* you: your *enemies*.

If you love *those* people, you're no longer following the rule of reciprocity. You're no longer doing to them as they do to you. You're choosing to actively offer care to those who do not or cannot offer care in return.

It can be easy to hear the word "enemy" and think of people out there, far from us, whom we rarely if ever have to encounter. But the reality is that the people who are the most challenging to love are sometimes right up close, right here, even within the community... even within the *church*.

I've been around Irving Park Lutheran Church about nine months now, so I can safely say that there are *no* people here in *this* congregation who are difficult to love, but I have been on staff at *other* churches, so I will tell you that, even within the community of the church, one can find

enemies who are difficult to love. If you haven't experienced this yet, go to more budget meetings.

Even within the community of the church, there are times when the affectionate fondness of *philia* runs out, and we need to learn how to do the hard work of unconditional agape. We need to learn to *love* the people we don't even *like*, the people who don't even like *us*. Who hurt us, judge us, or condemn us. Our enemies.

I want to be clear: this Gospel passage is not about putting up with situations of personal abuse or systemic injustice.

This is a passage about the reality that *real* love – within families, within marriages, within communities, within churches – real love is *hard* and requires us to make an active choice to stay in relationship even when it doesn't feel especially good.

This is *really hard*.

So... Why? Why should we do this? Why should we stay in relationship with our troublesome, adversarial, selfish, unkind enemies –the kind of people who are the very hardest to *even like*, let alone love! *Why* we love these people with an unconditional agape love?

Jesus says

we love this way because it is the way *God* loves.

We love this way because it is the way God loves *us*.

Be *merciful*, Jesus says, as *God*, your unconditionally loving parent, is *merciful*.

Haven't *we* been given mercy that we don't deserve? Haven't *we* been given love that we could never repay?... Love that goes beyond reciprocity, love that goes beyond affectionate fondness... Love that comes with *no* conditions?

Haven't we been loved with agape love, no matter how likeable we are from moment to moment?

Haven't we witnessed this kind of reckless, boundless love in the way *God... loves... us?*

As much as we might like it to, this Gospel passage doesn't solve all our relationship problems. It doesn't answer all our moral questions.

It doesn't suddenly make easy the complicated work of building community with one another when things are difficult.

But it does proclaim this radical Gospel truth:

we love *because* we are loved.