

Matthew 25:31-46
Matthew 5:42-48

LOVE

(Do Not Call “Love” What Most People Call “Love”)

I think I better start out this sermon by telling you that “I love you.” That doesn’t really matter very much – what matters is that Jesus loves you. And I do not love each and every one of you, like Jesus does. But I love many of you, and I love you as a church; I feel the love-bonds growing and expanding all the time. It entralls me. Half the time, I feel like I’m just standing around here amazed, as I watch it happening. And some of you love me too. Oh, not all of you! Real life is real life. But some of you love me a lot. And I am humbled and strengthened by it. And that doesn’t matter very much either. What matters is that you love Jesus – and God more and more, because of Jesus.

It seemed like I should get that out in the open while you could still hear it, because the subtitle of this sermon is: Do Not Call “Love” What Most People Call “Love.” I suspect that if you asked most people anywhere in the world, “What is Christianity about? What is its central theme?” – the vast majority of them would quickly reply, “Love. Christianity is about love.” It is the greatest cliché in the world. And like most clichés, it has lost its power – for most people, most of the time.

Love really is our theme. Love really is the high calling, the goal, our inspiration, and the vision that draws us. But we do not live up to its real shape and form very often. We do not manage to embody its meaning and purpose very often, or with any real consistency. So the constant use of the word is causing great confusion, both for us and for those around us. The end result is disillusionment, loss of hope, even despair. People think Christians are hypocrites, primarily because they are always talking about love and then failing to live up to it. But no human can live up to love – not in this world, not for very many others, not with any great consistency. So this constant talk of “love” produces anger and resentment toward the church and the Christian Faith from outsiders. And it often produces guilt and shame and sorrow and discouragement for the insiders, because frequently we realize, even more than the outsiders do, that we are not “living up to” love – not in any way close to what love’s requirements really are. Yet the thought of not living up to our primary theme and purpose is so painful that we can barely stand to face that fact in the open, at least not very often. Maybe once a month just before communion. The rest of the time, there is nothing left but to pretend. Better to pretend

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that we are loving than to look at the real contrast between what we call love and what love really is. Why? Because the assumption of most people is that we are in a Covenant of Works rather than a Covenant of Grace. In other words, if we discover and clearly see a place where we are not loving, our inner assumption is that we must immediately change and become loving – as if it were in our power to do that. As if we could just “up and decide to be more loving” whenever we wanted to. What enormous chutzpah! What enormous pride! What enormous mendacity.

Love is a gift. It comes through grace. Jesus will give you more love when your soul can handle it without shaking apart. You should never be ashamed because you are not more loving – only grateful for whatever love you do have. Maybe we are rightly ashamed, at times, because we do not open ourselves to receive more love from its source, or because we misuse it when it comes. But never be ashamed for the love you have been given. And we have every reason to trust the Christ to give us more love along the way, whenever we are ready – and not before. And every time Christ does that, it will make our lives more difficult, as well as more joyful.

I am already deep into the sermon, and I intended to give you some warnings, or at least some landmarks. My purpose this morning is to persuade you that a lot of the guilt most Christians carry about not being more loving is misplaced. My second purpose is to suggest that you reverse, at least in your own life, the modern trend of trying to get more love to more people, and concentrate instead on getting a truer love to fewer people. I hope you will come to see that this is what matches our WAY – our desire to be obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. Finally, I hope we might all leave here this morning with a clearer understanding of what we are about – and what we are not about.

Some of you say to me, from time to time, “You know, sometimes you put a really interesting new twist on the Scriptures and on the Christian Faith than what I’m used to.” Well, I’m glad you find it interesting. But if you really end up thinking I am twisting it, then I’m just being clever or cute, and most of Christendom has it right and is marching off without us. But if sometimes I am getting it closer to what Jesus meant and was – closer to the Path or WAY we should really be walking – then, you see, I am taking the twist *out* of it. So I hope you will ponder this: If most of liberal Protestantism is half-bored and half-committed because they have it right, and we are getting excited and

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deeper into the LIFE and growing closer to the Holy Spirit all the time – then where is the real twisting?! (It goes beyond just liberal Protestantism, and I am far from the only person twisting it, but we can hassle about that another time.)

Back to the Scripture passages we read this morning: Are you ready for the twisting? If you have visited five people in prison but failed to visit the other hundred and ten *thousand* people who are currently in federal prisons today – do you go to Heaven, or do you go to Hell? If you feed and clothe twenty-five or thirty people during your lifetime, some of them on a long-term basis, but fail to feed and clothe the other two billion people who really needed it – do you go to Heaven, or do you go to Hell? If all during your life you give to only one out of every twenty-five people who beg from you – and doing that, stretch your own resources to the thin edge of what you consider to be your other legitimate responsibilities – do you go to Heaven, or do you go to Hell? I can promise you that the twenty-four people who begged from you without a good result will not vouch for your Christian character. But what about *you*? Do you think that cuts you out of the definition of “Christian”? Does it mean that Jesus is not very pleased with you?

I am not suggesting that we just go watch football games and let the world go hang. Neither am I suggesting that every time you watch a football game you should feel guilty about not being out helping the poor. We can jump each other’s words to no purpose, but the Christian Life is bigger than a couple of mindless rules. We have to *want* to understand. Both individually and as a congregation, you are helping a lot more people today than you were three years ago. We are not trying to brag about it anymore. Neither is it making a very big dent in the world’s need. So my last question is this: Do you really think that in this world, you are going to be able to be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect? Self-confidence may be a good thing, in moderation, but that is absurd.

Jesus does set before us the standards of Heaven – of eternal life. He is audacious enough to hint toward where we are heading, trusting it to inspire and draw us. But there is no arriving at such perfection in this realm. If we pretend we are perfect, it stops our growth. If we get guilty about not being perfect, it only depresses and confuses us. If guilt is a wake-up call to what is really possible for us, that’s wonderful. Aside from that, guilt is not our friend – it only debilitates. How terribly

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sad that Jesus – who came to free us from guilt and shame – is the source of guilt and shame for so many people.

For as long as I have been consciously involved with the church (about sixty years now), somebody has been trotting out this passage about the sheep and the goats every time they want people to give to some cause or purpose. The implication and intended interpretation of the passage is obvious: If you do not give to every worthy cause – help all people, all the time ... especially when I want you to – then you are a goat, no friend of Jesus, and certainly not a Christian.

Will you think I am twisting it if I tell you: Never sucker in to that crass kind of manipulative appeal for counterfeit love? You are supposed to be Christ’s disciple/servants, not the dupes of human sentimentality. You are supposed to be taking orders and guidance from your daily prayers. If a human brother or sister suggests a concern, of course you listen. What if the Spirit sent them for that very purpose? But always, you take it to prayer before you respond, before you act: Is this assignment really for you? Is this something you are supposed to respond to? Does this new appeal fit in with the guidance you have already received and are already trying to respond to? The Christian Life is lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not under emotional pressure from the outside. Christianity is bigger than the whim of a guilty moment, or the chimera of a sudden single act that will make you right with God.

My twist – and I claim it is a twisting *back* toward the real Message – is that Jesus’ stories and teachings are preparing us to respond to individuals, one at a time. And not all of them, or always, but only when we conclude that they are “sent” – that it is indeed what the Spirit is asking of us. Jesus does take away all our normal conditioning, so we will not rule out any individual that He sends to us. But the key, as always, is obedient prayer, not general humanistic sentiment. You cannot make a quantitative impression on infinity; you can, however, make a qualitative impression on infinity. Human trouble and need are infinite, at least from our perspective.

How did the Message get twisted? The nineteenth century reeked of human pride. The Industrial Revolution, despite its struggles and cruelty, seemed to promise a solution and an end to all our problems. Sherlock Holmes was solving every mystery and proving that everything

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had a logical explanation. We really believed, in Western culture, that we were about to cure all disease, understand all mystery, harness all nature, and solve all sociological and psychological equations. We wrote of Utopia, dreamed of Utopia, believed we really could bring Peace On Earth. The church went right along with it, even thinking maybe it was the leader in a lot of it. The Social Gospel was about ridding the world of poverty, disease, and ignorance. In the process, we would also Christianize the world, and everybody would soon realize that Christianity was the world’s one true religion, and that Western culture and government would make the world perfect. So we sent missionaries everywhere to convert the heathen, and we sang “In Christ there is no east or west” But quietly and in subtle ways, we were also relegating God to the position of mascot. Since we had the gist of it now, we would do it “for God” – but by our own effort and will. And of course, we deeply believed that this was what God wanted us to do. We were coming of age.

So naturally, Christianity tried to tool up – to go on the assembly line – along with everything else. Love went on the assembly line too. Naturally, individual love was too slow; personal devotion to Jesus – personal piety – was mocked and laughed to scorn. We didn’t need prayer on the Christianity assembly line. What we needed were vast denominational programs that would gather all our resources and distribute them en masse – to feed and convert the masses. *That* is the twisting. “We don’t need God anymore – not one-on-one. We don’t have to obey the Holy Spirit on a daily basis anymore – the programs will save the world.” *That* is the twisting.

It has taken most of the twentieth century to boot us out of our pride and convince us that we need God again, deep down and personal. There are no wars to end all wars. There is no Peace On Earth. We are not going to save the world by politics. Nothing we do here will last. And every new generation has to learn all the spiritual truths all over again. Jesus’ Kingdom is not of this world. So the Good News is not that we save or perfect the world. The Good News is that God’s plans and purposes are much, much bigger than we thought, and that we can each awaken and live for the Kingdom – giving all our gifts and resources, in this very temporal world, for the values and the people that are eternal. It is a weird new way of seeing and behaving. It always has been. And once we awaken to it, all the old ways of seeing and behaving – all the old motives and purposes – look very drab, boring, foolish ... estranged from God.

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So what is my point? Shun the Great Inversion. We cannot live up to the design and meaning of love. It is too high for us. That is its very power and hope and truth – that it calls us onward, to places we have not been. But only if we let it be what it really is. Shun the Great Inversion. We cannot live up to LOVE (or to Jesus), so we try to invert it – try to call what we *can* live up to, “love.” That is how we end up losing hope, getting depressed, and reducing the whole affair to something so minuscule that it no longer transforms us. We invert love from what it is to what we can live up to. That inverts and reduces the whole meaning of love to pabulum – to Gerber’s baby food. When Gerber’s becomes our reworked definition of gourmet, we give up all our dreams about cooking, and eating. If giving somebody a Thanksgiving basket of food is your idea of Christian love, then what is your hope of Heaven? By the way, what are the names of the people who received our Thanksgiving baskets last year, and how are they doing today? Are they here among us? Part of our faith family? Why would anybody even walk across the street to get the sort of lackluster faith or love that most liberal churches have been talking about in our time?

It should come as no great surprise that we are not Jesus – that we are not even our true selves yet. Where do we think we are? Do we think that we get born perfect here, and go on from there? That we get married because we have a perfect love, and go on from there? That we join the church because we are converted and have become perfect Christians, and go on from there? Who do we think we are? *Where* do we think we are? Do we still think the Adam and Eve story is about an ancient couple who made a mistake and we are going to get over it?

We are sinners on a great and exciting journey, with the world’s most incredible Guide. But we are far indeed from arriving – far indeed from the fullness of love or any of the other goals we seek. We get bits and pieces – a taste here and there. Even that is so glorious we can sometimes barely stay in our skins. So let’s stop being in such a hurry. Time to trust the Guide. We don’t have to be uptight. Patience (well, true patience) is a virtue. Honesty is a top priority. Without it, we can make no progress. Our love is far greater than it used to be; it is very small in comparison to what it will one day be. And if we pretend, we cannot grow. In the spiritual life, there is no way to cheat. It is what it is. We are where we are. Christ can take it from there, if we come as we really are. Shun the Great Inversion.

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Moving toward our goal – making progress – is all it takes to make and keep us happy, healthy, alive, and vibrant. We are on a Path. We keep taking steps to make progress, not to reach perfection. Most liberal Protestant churches in our time have forgotten the steps. The Great Inversion robs us of incentive, of motive, of passion. I mean, if you are already nearly perfect, why strive? If you are already an illustration of what Christians should be, why call others into the game? Let ‘em look and weep, and maybe come join us when they get nearly perfect like we are. That is how it has been in many of our churches over the past two generations. If we are going nowhere – and have reduced the faith to nothing more than giving material things to others we do not really care about – then why strive? Giving one percent of our income instead of ten percent seems perfectly adequate then. Who cares anymore, anyway? Losing churches and members for forty years, as our denomination has done, is explained away as the sociological or psychological “breaks,” and that maybe most people don’t care about helping people (yawn) as much as we do. Let somebody else carry the Message, and remember the heritage, and invite people to come live and die with us for a purpose and a vision far beyond what we can handle or live up to.

In any case, love is a divine principle – an unattainable goal in this world. Jesus did not love everybody personally. You can claim He did, just to keep theologically orthodox, if it makes you feel better. But that is not what the stories reveal. In the form of a human, Jesus was limited by time and space just like we are. He could not get to everybody or be there for everybody any more than we can. Lots of people who needed Him were not healed or taught or comforted or converted. According to John, that is why He was eager to get back to His higher identity as the Holy Spirit. And in the flesh, Jesus was quite angry with some who opposed Him. Though we are supposed to love our enemies, He would not even speak to King Herod. And by that time, Jesus had laid out in lavender so many scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees that, if words were physical weapons, the streets would have been running with blood.

I suspect that Jesus really did love His enemies. But if He did (and I have certainly been in numerous debates about this), it was certainly *not* by any definition of “love” we use for ourselves or apply to each other. What we tend to apply to ourselves and each other is a vague but powerful assumption that we should somehow care deeply and personally and tenderly for every person on the face of the earth, and especially if they

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are hurt or in some way need us. Failing to respond to any person’s need is clear evidence that we are not really Christian. At least I have seen and heard that axiom used, abused, and defended – with heated passion – over and over for as long as I have been involved with the Christian church.

Have you seen through it yet? Jesus does not expect you to respond to the needs of six billion people. Jesus does not expect you to band together with the one and a half million members of the UCC and take care of all the needs of six billion people. Do any of the denominational structures, missions, or management tactics of the twentieth century sound to you like what Jesus was leading up to and trying to organize – what He lived and died to invite us into? Have we not trained ourselves for a long time now to feel guilty about the wrong things? How convenient that we can feel a vague and general guilt about vague and general denominational programs – and not have to notice a very specific guilt about the three or four individuals whom Jesus is sending across our path because He wants us to care about them deeply and genuinely.

Satan loves this thing about love. It goes like this: Jesus doesn’t really care if we have a relationship with Him – doesn’t care if we know Him, learn from Him, talk with Him, or obey Him. The only thing that really matters is if we ourselves are loving people. And if we do something we identify as loving, then we are “good” – “right” – on God’s side. Isn’t that correct? That way, you see, we can be loving (at least in our own eyes), and genuinely so – and have no obedience to God, no concern for God’s purposes, no part or partnership in the Kingdom. But we’re loving – while still running things our own way, messing up all the Spirit’s timing, and frequently doing more damage than good. We all know people who have been the recipients of this human-driven, humanistic love. Jesus’ name is often called into it, especially when it goes bad, but His opinion was never asked for and His guidance was never sought. Love has become the god – the idol – the excuse and justification for everything. And humans who think they are smart enough to design and run love by their own will and wisdom are operating out of hubris – pride – the king of the Seven Deadly Sins.

We want to be loving, but we want to do it without Jesus so that we can stay in charge and decide when, how much, what kind, and with whom. That is the Achilles’ heel of the liberal church: Okay, Jesus showed us about love; now we don’t need Him anymore – we’ll do it ourselves. Satan loves love. It is one of his best temptations. “Loving

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people” who have no reverence for God – no humility or obedience, no gratitude or worship – suit Satan just fine.

Stop feeling guilty about not loving everybody. Start feeling guilty if you turn away from the people Jesus sends to you, or sends you after. There won't be many of them, not at any one time. The rest you are dubbing-in because you see their need or somebody else is pressuring you. But they are not being sent to you, nor you to them. Of course, it is hard to keep such things clear. That's why it is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day.

And you already have your family, and your work. *You* are the church's mission to the world, not the programs we design by committee or as a denomination. You are engaged in the world, and you will not stop all the injustice or right all the wrongs. But in the end, some people will realize that they know one of Christ's disciples because of the way you go at what you do best. That is your part; the rest is up to Him. He is the Savior. We are only His disciple/servants.

Christianity is not about poverty or chastity, or being sad, grim, and guilty. It is not about the Virgin Birth, or the Second Coming, or going to Hell. Those are the twistings. Christianity is about getting out of Hell – out of bondage, sin, loneliness, fear, depression. It is about joy, and service, and love – but out of a one-on-one dialogue and relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ that goes on every day. Stop feeling guilty about the wrong things. Life with Christ is not about being perfect or looking good in this world. It always has us on the thin edge of being in trouble with the ways of this world, and with some of the people in this world. But that's okay, if we trust Jesus. Love fewer people more. Add people to your love list only at the Spirit's guidance. Get good at what you do best, and keep doing it as an offering to your Lord, even if nobody else thinks it has anything to do with religion or the church. *You* are the church. Don't ever let anybody substitute a Christian program for the Christian Life. And remember: I love you. More to the point, He loves you.