

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**February 16, 2020**

**“Who Do You Love?”**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

## **Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48**

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

## **Sermon**

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

You might be familiar with a United Methodist pastor named Adam Hamilton. He’s written a lot of books, turns a lot of the sermon series into book studies that you might have done here in church, and so forth. One time he did a “Love and Marriage” series in his church. He pastors the largest church in the denomination and certainly in the United States, out in Kansas City, and thousands of people go to his church. And so to prepare for the series, he polled his congregation. This was before a series on Love and Marriage. And he said, “If you could change one thing about your spouse, what would it be?” So that’s how we’re going to start out this morning. If you could change...No. We’re not going to do group marriage therapy this morning.

And he categorized these according to age brackets and so forth. The best response was among women who were most mature in age, who when asked what they would change about their husbands, they said, “Nothing. I’ve finally got him just like I want him.” Does that ring true?

Who here thinks that their Valentine is perfect? Yeah, that's the right answer, there you go. Some of us might think that we are perfect as we are. Some of us might wish we were perfect or that someone else in our lives was perfect. But if you remember the Scripture reading, Jesus ends this part of the Sermon on the Mount by the phrase that I keep bringing up from time to time, because it's pretty central to our theology as Christians in the Methodist tradition. Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." And every time I bring that up, somebody wrinkles their nose, turns up their nose at me. Somebody furrows their brow. And the exclamation is almost always, "What? That's impossible! Nobody is perfect. Nobody can be perfect." And yet, this is something that Jesus point-blank told us to do. Who are we to furrow our brow at Jesus?

This section is found in the Sermon on the Mount, which continues on well after Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with Beatitudes, which we've been looking at over the last several weeks. And it's important to note that Jesus doesn't just come out of the blue with this pretty audacious command for us to follow. Instead, it's couched in His teaching, at least in this particular part, about love. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies.'

Early on in ministry, I heard of an old country preacher that, whenever he'd come across sayings of Jesus like this in his preaching, he'd say, "I sure wish Jesus hadn't said that."

And part of it is, today we have different definitions of both "neighbor" and "enemy" than they had in Jesus' day in particular. These days we hear the word "neighbor," we think of our literal neighbor. Those that live on either side of us or maybe on the same street as us or same general area as us. And the problem with trying to love them is that most of us don't even really *know* our neighbors, at least not all of them.

And then, when we think of "enemy," and we hear the word "enemy," we think of our literal enemies. Maybe someone like Osama bin Laden, right? And then our brains default to, "Well yeah, everybody hates that guy's guts, so it's easy for us to hate him, too, and no biggie for us to hate him. I mean, he's done some pretty bad stuff against us." The problem is when we start to lump other people into that category without even realizing it.

There's a layperson named John Voss who wrote a pretty detailed commentary on just the Sermon on the Mount. And he points out that the Jewish people, especially in Jesus' day, took "neighbor" and "enemy" in different ways than we do today. That basically they had three different categories for people in their lives. The first was *neighbor*, but it wasn't just their actual literal neighbors. *Neighbor* for them meant

someone that you are glad to see. Someone in whom you delight and enjoy their presence and company. Think of *neighbor* like Mr. Rogers, who called us “neighbor,” right? At the beginning of every episode, after his little ditty that he’d sing and tossing his Chucks and everything else, he would say, “Hello, neighbor.” Right? Not because we lived next door to him, but because he was *delighted* to see us through the TV camera and to spend time with us in that way. That’s what Jewish people think of as neighbors.

The second category for people that they had was then *foreigners*, or aliens in their midst. But still, those were people that you treated well, that you treated with utmost hospitality, taking care of the foreigner in your midst. Someone who you still deeply respected.

Then there was the third category, and that third category was *enemies*. And over time, the default became that if you didn’t fall into the *neighbor* category or the *foreigner* category with somebody, you automatically got lumped into the *enemy* category. Not based on anything you did or didn’t do to that person, but simply because of their attitude that they took toward you. “Love your neighbor” is a direct command from the Old Testament from the Jewish scriptures. Jesus said, “You’ve heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” “Hate your enemy” wasn’t a direct command, so we might say, “Wait a minute, Jesus.” But by Jesus’ time, hating enemies was included in the Psalms. Several of the Psalms talk about hating one’s enemies, and especially hating the enemies of God, to make sure we’re on God’s side as well. So by Jesus’ time, hating one’s enemy was pretty much a command, just like loving your neighbor. It became the default thought toward anyone lumped into that third category.

So therefore, when Jesus says to love your enemy, somebody who might actually be against you in some way, shape or form, someone who you might have just written off, means to shake off how you’ve been conditioned to think about such people in your life. It means to change your attitude toward that person or persons, even if they haven’t earned it. To love your enemies means to take them out of that third bucket and to put them into the first one in your life. To make them a neighbor in your heart, someone in whom you actually delight. Why? Because that’s what God did with us. Sin entered the picture and made us enemies with God, set us in a complete opposite direction from God, and set us on a collision course, where we weren’t on God’s side. God could have left us in that bucket, but God sent Jesus to turn us from enemies of His back into neighbors. Someone in whom He delights and He claims as His child.

Why does Jesus say to love our enemies? It’s because that’s how God thinks of us, of *everybody*. Jesus goes on to say, “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” Grace is not fair.

1 John tells us that God is love and that God is perfect in love toward everybody. So therefore, that should be our posture toward everybody as well.

Luke records Jesus as saying, “Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.” If you get to study the Greek root of that word—I love doing those types of things—it was interesting to me, in another part of the New Testament, it’s translated as “adult.” Put that in the saying of Jesus. “Be adults, like God is an adult.”

So how do we love? It’s not simply tolerance and accepting people for who they are, like our culture today popularly defines love. It goes beyond that.

Luke records a few more of Jesus’ words. He says, “But to you who are listening, I say love your enemies; do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you.” First of all, Jesus says, *do good*. Ask, what will do good toward this person who I really don’t like right now?

In Romans chapter 12, Paul says, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. For it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.’ On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Every time I read this passage, I think of one time I was at my in-laws’ house and was moaning and groaning, probably about church people, and my mother-in-law looked at me and said, “Dan, remember, you can attract more flies with honey than you can vinegar.”

Bullying is such a huge problem in our schools these days amongst our children, right? But gee, where did our children learn the behavior from? And whenever bullies come up in our lives, whether they’re kids or adults, as we’ve come to understand bullies, they’re the ones who are more acutely feeling their shortcomings, whether they realize it or not.

I heard a great phrase one time that said, “Hurt people hurt people.” I’ll say it again: ***Hurt people hurt people.*** Somebody hurts us, what do we want to do in retaliation? We want to hurt them back, right? We want to make them hurt worse than they hurt us. It’s human nature. But that’s not the way of Jesus. We’re to break the cycle and do good instead, and love.

I’m always reminded of Bishop Carter, who served in the Southeast jurisdiction. He tells the story—I think I’ve used it before—when he was a pastor and somebody came into his office, started tearing into him, up one side and down the other, etc. And when he could finally get a word in edgewise, he looked at the person and said, “Made in the image of God. Handle accordingly.” And the guy said, “What in the world does *that* have to do with anything I’m talking about? That’s stupid!” and continued on his

tirade. And Bishop Carter waited until he could get another word in and said, “Made in the image of God. Handle accordingly.” And the guy said, “Quit saying that! It sounds stupid!” and continued on. And finally, when he could speak again, he said, “I’m reminding myself that *you are made in the image of God, and that I am to handle you accordingly.*”

We are to do good as we love.

Second of all, Jesus says, we are to *bless*, which is hand in hand with doing good. How can I bless this person or these people? 1 Peter says, “Finally, all of you be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing.” Are you noticing a theme here? “Because to this you are called, so that you may inherit a blessing.” Maybe to bless the person might be to provide for a need that you see in their lives. It means somehow staying in the relationship, especially when all you want to do is just say, “Get out of my sight and get out of my life.” And that’s hard, especially when they’ve got you feeling like you’re backed into a corner.

Lastly, Jesus says to *pray for those who mistreat you*. To pray even for those who mistreat us or others that we love. And friends, if we’ve lost the will to pray for someone, we better start praying for ourselves, because we’re in deep. And we’ve forgotten God’s gracious mercy and saving love for us.

You see, it’s easy to judge. It’s easy to jump to conclusions. It’s easy to let our prejudices take over and to draw hard lines in the sand. It’s easy to hate. It’s human nature. And when the pastor says something like reminding us that Jesus says, “Ah-ah-ah, be perfect like your Father in heaven is perfect,” it’s easy to just throw up our hands and shrug our shoulders and say, “Pfft. Nobody’s perfect. Forget Jesus.” Oftentimes, especially when we can’t fathom how in the world we can love someone who is so wrong, so obtuse, so pig-headed, sometimes so evil—sometimes we just don’t know how to respond, such that whatever they say or do just leaves our mouths hanging open.

So especially when you don’t know what to do, go with love. And maybe even more especially when you *think* you know what to do: Check yourself before you wreck yourself, and go with love.

To quote the band Boston, it’s more than a feeling. It looks more like this; maybe you saw this ad during the Super Bowl.

(Recorded voice) The ancient Greeks had four words for love. The first is *Philia*. *Philia* is affection that grows from friendship. Next, there’s *Storge*, the kind you have for a

grandparent or a brother. Third, there's Eros, the uncontrollable urge to say, "I love you." The fourth kind of love is different. It's the most admirable. It's called Agape, love as an action. It takes courage, sacrifice, strength. For 175 years we've been helping people act on their love, so they can look back or look ahead and say, "We got it right. We did good."

(Pastor Dan) I saw a great quote on Facebook this week, and I was like, "Man, this is awesome, ties right into my sermon." It said, "Love is not some small-minded idea that we bypass on the way to greater theological principles. Love is Ph.D. level Christianity." I love that.

In our pursuit of Jesus, we will spend the rest of our lives learning to love more passionately, intimately, intentionally, and transformationally. There is no higher call. So go with love. More than just a feeling. Go with that agape love, love as an action. Love that is not deserved. It begins when we accept God's love for ourselves through believing in Jesus and truly giving our whole lives over to Him, even those, and especially those moments, where we want to draw back and get ready to hurt back. To let the Holy Spirit fill us with holy love and heal those hurts with holy love, because we can't give what we don't have.

And lastly, but certainly not least, ask God to make you perfect as He is perfect, in grace and mercy and holy love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.