

Isaiah 43:1-4a  
Luke 6:27-38

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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## The Great Defusing Power

“Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (*Luke 6:38*)

Until I turned fifteen I was quite short of stature, just 5'2", so I used to get ribbed a lot by my friends and others. “Shorty,” “Squeak,” “Wee Willy Wilson” and some names it would be imprudent to repeat. I compensated for it by being very quick and agile, a very good wrestler, and a first rate gymnast. So I more than held my own when, as often happened, things got physical. Still, the names bothered me, and I knew that this was not a satisfactory way to change things.

Then an adult gave me some advice. “When someone speaks ill of you,” he said, “calls you nasty names, or tells you how dumb or ugly you are—*agree with them.*” That sounded ludicrous, and I couldn't figure out how that could possibly help. But it did work. When I tried it, I learned that it took all the power and sting out of their insult. It popped their balloon. In fact it not only stopped the insults and name calling, it had a way of turning hostility into friendships. Perhaps it wasn't love exactly, but it was a step in the right direction.

When Jesus says “Love your enemies,” like Paul in the famous 1 Corinthians 13 “love” passage, he's not talking about love as affections or feelings. He's underscoring that love is a choice that we make, an act of will. “Love your enemies” isn't anything about touchy-feely. It can be excruciatingly difficult, especially when being kind-hearted to adversaries alienates those with whom you once stood, who now perceive you as a traitor to the cause.

“Love your enemies.” Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, writing in *Works of Love*, says something at once self evident yet quite remarkable. To have love, he says, is to presuppose that love subsists in others. That they have the capacity not only to recognize what you give them, for what it is, but also to respond by reaching to that interior place and give love back from themselves. We may believe there are exceptions, people incapable of receiving or giving love, but Jesus does not countenance that. He died for all humanity, to bring us back to God. If we prejudice another as not being worthy of our love, we evoke the same response. But when love does not prejudice it has the capacity to disarm resistance, and so defuses it..

Love also has the capacity to rekindle a life that feels it has no purpose, which is the most extravagant gift.

A few weeks ago Jane and I went to Bahama Breeze, one of our favorite restaurants. At the next table was woman in her fifties, with her mother. The mother looked extremely frail, I doubt she could have weighed more than 85 pounds, and sat very quietly through the whole meal consuming, nevertheless, a large plateful of food. Her emaciated look and the vanishing food made me think of the Mafia Don in *Prizzi's Honor* who would consume enough food for a platoon of infantry, never gaining an ounce. All the while the middle-aged daughter tended her mother with loving care, telling her of the events of the day, catching her up on the children, radiating love for her.

As we were about to leave, Jane complimented the daughter on the loving way she attended her mother. The mother, it seems, had lived for some time in a so-so elder-care home in northern New Jersey. But when a room became available close by the daughter's home, the daughter moved her in. It totally transformed the mother's life. Now the daughter could drive a very short distance a couple of times a day,

eat meals with her there or take her home for a night or a weekend. As the daughter spoke of these things she barely held back the tears of gratitude for her being so close at hand. Such love makes great demands, but it is transformational.

When love does the unimaginable, it yields the unimaginable. Some time ago our Christian Outreach Committee worked on its annual assessment of mission organizations that we help sponsor around the globe. One of them is the Medical Benevolence Foundation that builds and staffs hospitals and clinics in areas where they are most needed. We invited the regional representative, Barry Almy, to join us over a lovely lunch hosted by John Woodcock. As we ate, Barry told of how he and his wife had quit their jobs and, with their family, offered to go wherever they were most needed. So MBF sent them to southern Sudan where a civil war had been going on for forty years. There are few Christians in that part of Sudan which is primarily Muslim. The Red Crescent organization, a counterpart to the Red Cross, will only give aid to Muslims. I make no judgment of that. But the Medical Benevolence Foundation makes no such distinction. When Barry and his co-workers wanted to aid a certain village that desperately needed aid, the presiding elder of the village was so impressed that he and the entire village asked to convert to Christianity, even though it could cost them their lives as “infidels.”

In one of Roberto Rossellini’s last films, “Generale Della Rovere” (1959) A petty crook in Italy toward the end of World War 2 poses as an Italian officer so as to extort money from families whose loved ones have been arrested by the Nazis. He tells the families that, for a price, he can influence the Germans to gain their parole.

Eventually he’s arrested by the Gestapo and forced by them to impersonate a prestigious figure in the Italian resistance, Generale Della Rovere, so that he can gain information from political prisoners. But the conman performs his role so convincingly that the other prisoners come to worship him as their moral leader. He is progressively compelled to live above himself to match their expectations. In the end, so transformed, he refuses to betray their trust and is put in front of a firing squad where he dies a hero’s death. He has truly become Generale Della Rovere.

This is our role as Christians. To so choose to live that by groundbreaking love the world about us is transformed into the kingdom Jesus personified.

Amen.