

Perfect Love
Leviticus 19:1 – 2, 9 – 18; Matthew 5:38 – 48
Sunday, February 19, 2017

I came across something this past week that I want to share with you. It's an obituary from a funeral home in Galveston, Texas:

“Leslie Ray ‘Popeye’ Charping was born in Galveston, TX on November 20, 1942 and passed away January 30, 2017, which was 29 years longer than expected and much longer than he deserved. Leslie battled with cancer in his latter years and lost his battle, ultimately due to being the horse’s (expletive) he was known for. He leaves behind 2 relieved children...along with six grandchildren and countless other victims, including an ex-wife, relatives, friends, neighbors, doctors, nurses, and random strangers.

“At a young age, Leslie quickly became a model example of bad parenting combined with mental illness and a complete commitment to drinking, drugs, womanizing, and being generally offensive. Leslie enlisted to serve in the Navy, but not so much in a brave and patriotic way, but more as part of a plea deal to escape sentencing on criminal charges. While enlisted, Leslie was the Navy boxing champion and went on to sufficiently embarrass his family and country by spending the remainder of his service in the Balboa Mental Health Hospital, receiving much needed mental healthcare services.

“Leslie was surprisingly intelligent, however he lacked ambition and motivation to do anything more than being reckless, wasteful, squandering the family savings, and fantasizing about get rich quick schemes. Leslie’s hobbies included being abusive to his family, expediting trips to heaven for the beloved family pets, and fishing, which he was less skilled with than the previously mentioned. Leslie’s life served no other obvious purpose, he did not contribute to

society or serve his community, and he possessed no redeeming qualities besides quick-whited sarcasm, which was amusing during his sober days.

“With Leslie’s passing he will be missed only for what he never did; being a loving husband, father, and good friend. No services will be held, there will be no prayers for eternal peace, and no apologies to the family he tortured. Leslie’s remains will be cremated and kept in the barn until ‘Ray,’ the family donkey’s wood shavings run out. Leslie’s passing proves that evil does in fact die, and hopefully marks a time of healing and safety for all.”

Some people are very hard to love. I think that’s something that we all struggle with. “How do I deal with this person, live with this person who hurts me? How do I *love* this person who makes it so incredibly difficult to love them?” I think that’s something we’re struggling with as a *country* right now (and have been for a *while*), “This person who is so different from me, who has a totally different worldview and beliefs, who I do not see eye to eye with and we do not agree on anything – how do I love them?”

Jesus says, “It’s *easy* to love the people who love *you*, the people you get along with. It’s *easy* to show love and kindness to the people who are nice to *you*. It’s *easy* to do all this with the people who *make it easy for you*. What about the people who make it *hard*? What about the people who are *hard* to love? What about the people who *aren’t* nice to you? What about the people who *don’t* love you back; the people you *don’t get along with*?”

So what does it mean to love our enemies? What does it mean to *love*?

Krista Tippett says of love that “we have made it private, contained it in family, when its audacity is in its potential to cross tribal lines. We’ve fetishized it as romance, when its true measure is a quality of sustained, practical care. We’ve lived it as a *feeling*, when it is a way of *being*.” Love is not simply an emotion, something we *feel* that exists in our hearts or in our heads. Love is a *way of being* in the world. It is the practical ways in which we care for each other.

Paul, in the well-known verses from 1 Corinthians, says that “love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” *That* is the love that God has for *us*. Love that is patient and kind and hopeful; love that never gives up. Those are the practical ways in which we are called to love each other.

A little later in the first letter of John, it says that when we love one another in that way – with patience and kindness and truth and hope and endurance – when we *serve* each other and *sacrifice* for each other, even though we have never *seen* God, it’s like we see God in that other person. So love is the concrete, practical ways that we care for one another that allows us to see and experience the presence and the love of God.

When you think about loving your enemies, think of it in terms of, “How can I be *patient* with this person? How can I be *kind* to this person? Am I being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude with them? Am I insisting on my own way? How can I *serve* them or *sacrifice* for them? Am I being irritable or resentful with people who are different from me or disagree with me? Am I rejoicing when they mess up and make mistakes?” What if you could rejoice when they do

well? What if you could *hope* for them to do well? What if you could *believe* your enemies? Believe *in* them? What would *that* look like?

What if, with these people who are hard for you to love, you could *be* in such a way that lets them see and experience the presence and the love of God through you? What if you were simply a conduit through which the love of God flows out into the world?

I think that *this* is the most important thing that the Church of Jesus Christ has to *do* and to *teach* in this culture and this country and this world today. How to love. How to love people who are *different* from us. How to love our enemies and the people who are difficult to love. How to *listen* to them and *understand* them and *live* with them. How to care for each other in practical ways that not just cross but *obliterate* tribal lines. *That* is our calling as the Church today.

But then Jesus has to go and say, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” And right there is where we hear the needle scratch off the record. “Wait, *what?* Be *perfect?* I thought we were talking about loving our enemies, and I was tracking with you. That’s something within the realm of possibility. But now you’re telling us to be *perfect* – like *God* – and that is something that I *know* I cannot be.”

We tend to think of being perfect as meaning “no mistakes.” You never slip up. You get everything right. That is perfection. If a pitcher in a baseball game doesn’t allow any hits and doesn’t walk any of the batters from the opposing team, they call that a *perfect game*. In school if you don’t miss a single answer on the test, you get a 100, and that’s a *perfect score*. And so Jesus is telling us that we should be perfect? That we should never mess up, never make

mistakes, never falter in loving our enemies? I mean, loving our enemies is hard enough without the added pressure of Jesus telling us to be *perfect* at it!

But think about it this way. In a baseball game, a pitcher might not allow any hits and might not walk any batters, but say he throws a wild pitch that goes over the catcher's head. He makes a *mistake*, but it's *still* a perfect game. And maybe you get every answer right on your history test, you don't *miss* anything, but you spell a word wrong. You made a *mistake*, but you *still* get a 100, a perfect score.

You can make mistakes and still be perfect. Because the perfection that Jesus is talking about here has *nothing to do* with *not making mistakes*.

Jesus has just finished telling us to love the people we *don't* get along with *the same way* we love the people we *do* get along with. To treat the people who *aren't* nice to us *the same way* we treat the people who *are* nice to us. To treat our *enemies* *the same way* we treat our *friends*. And the reason we *do* this, Jesus says, is because that's exactly what *God* does. He says God makes the sun rise on the evil *and* on the good. They *each* see a new day. God gives life to *each* of them. God makes the rain fall on the righteous *and* the unrighteous.

Jesus says that God loves the good *and* the bad, the righteous *and* the unrighteous, those who love him *and* those who don't. God loves them all equally. God's love is the same across the board. There is no variation in it. God is *perfect* in God's ability to love. So for Jesus to tell us to be perfect *like God* means that we should strive to love *everyone* *the same*. The good and the bad. Our friends and our enemies. Those who make it easy and those who make it hard. Love them all the same, equally, evenly, across the board. *That* is what Jesus is talking about here

when he says to be perfect. Instead of thinking of perfection as never making a mistake, Jesus shows us a perfection that is based on loving and treating everyone the same.

We see this in Leviticus when God is giving the law to the people of Israel, these rules that will help them live in right relationship with each other. God says that when you are resolving a dispute between two people, do not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. Treat both of them the same, equally. Resolve the dispute based on *what it is*, not based on our own biases or prejudices or politics.

It talks about when you harvest your field, don't take *everything*, but leave some for the poor and the alien (the immigrant). Then right after that it says, "Do not steal." Why do you steal? Because someone has something that you do not. So when *you* have something that others do not, do not hold it back from them, but when others have something *you* do not, do not *take* it from them. It's like Cornell West says, "Justice is love in action." And we are called to act justly. To treat everyone the same, equally. To love your *neighbor* as *yourself*.

Who is your neighbor? The righteous *and* the unrighteous. The good *and* the bad. The poor *and* the rich. The immigrant *and* the citizen. The conservative *and* the liberal. Male *and* female. Black *and* white. Gay *and* straight. Christian *and* non-Christian. Jesus hung out with the good, faithful, religious people *and* the prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners; the people everyone else hated. He loved *them* the same as he loved *everyone else*. No partiality. No favoring. Perfect love.

And *that's* the love that God has for *us*. Even when we mess up and make mistakes and make an absolute wreck out of our lives and our relationships, God's love for us does not waver. God

loves you with a *perfect love*. A love that is patient and kind and self-sacrificing and eternal. And we are called to emulate that love and share it with others. *That* is our *challenge* as followers of Jesus. To love, not just when it's *easy*, but when it is very, very hard. Because when love is *hard* is when love is *needed* the most. And the people who are the hardest to love are often the people who need love the most.