

Cultivating Love
Matthew 5:43–48; Romans 12:9–21
Sunday, April 3, 2022 (Lent 5)

I had another sermon all planned out for today. I was going to preach on the lectionary text, John 12, where Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus' feet with expensive oil and dries them with her hair. I had it all outlined last Saturday; I was way ahead of the game and feeling pretty good about it. Then on Sunday night, the Oscars came on, and with it, the slap heard 'round the world. For those of you who *don't* know what I'm talking about, during the show, comedian Chris Rock made a joke about actress Jada Pinkett Smith not having any hair. As it turns out, she has alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that causes you to lose your hair. The joke was in poor taste – it was *personal* – and Jada Pinkett Smith's husband, actor Will Smith, took offense to it. He got up, walked on stage, and slapped Chris Rock across the face. *Hard.*

It was a big to-do; everyone was talking about it. But what really got me was what happened *next*. About 30 minutes later, Will Smith won the Oscar for Best Actor. He went up on stage to receive his award. Everyone was applauding him. And then he said this: "In this time in my life, in this moment, I am overwhelmed by what God is calling on me to do and be in this world...I'm being called on in my life to love people and to protect people and to be a river to my people...It's like I want to be a vessel for love...That's what I want to do. I want to be an ambassador of that kind of love and care and concern." And then he vaguely addressed what had just happened 30 minutes before; apologized to the *audience* for it, but not to the person he hit. And then he said, "I know I look crazy right now. But love will make you do crazy things."

Love will make you do crazy things. Like hit someone?

Now, I don't want to cast judgment on Will Smith *or* Chris Rock; they're both flawed and sinful human beings just like me and you. And I don't even particularly want to focus on *that story*. I mean, who really cares about two celebrities getting in a fight when there are such *bigger* problems in the world. But I think the *sentiment* that he expressed is indicative of a much *larger* problem. How do we treat people that we disagree with; people who hurt us; people we think are bad or wrong or even evil? Because somewhere over the past couple of years, our culture seems to have taken a turn where it is okay now to yell at people (in public) and belittle them and threaten them and attack them and hurt them. I don't care *who* is doing it, that kind of behavior is *not* okay. It is 100% *against the life and teachings of Jesus*. We are called to live lives that embody and show forth to others the love of God that we have seen and experienced in Jesus Christ. I mean, when Jesus was asked what the most important part of all of this was, he said, "Love God and love your neighbor." And I'm fairly certain that when Jesus said to love our neighbor, he did not mean *hit* them or *yell* at them or *belittle* them or *threaten* them or *attack* them.

Jesus says that the most important aspect of our faith is our capacity to love. It sounds *so simple*, and yet it is *so hard*, and we get it *so wrong, so often*. So how can we cultivate our ability to love?

In order to talk about *that*, I think we need to back up a bit and talk about what love *is*. Because I think *that* is part of the problem. So many of us have become used to thinking about love as a *feeling* or *emotion*, something that exists in our *hearts* or in our *heads*. Love is something that I *feel* or *have*; I *have* love for you. But when scripture talks about love – when *Jesus* talks about love, when *Paul* talks about love – they are not just talking about something that we *feel*. They are talking about something that we *do*.

And so we go back to the most basic definition of love in scripture. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in *wrongdoing* but rejoices in the *truth*. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” That is not an abstract emotion or feeling or thought. Love is found in the *ways* that I am patient with you. The *ways* that I am kind toward you. The *ways* that I do not insist on my *own* way with you. The ways that I do not point out what you have done *wrong* and throw it back in your face, but the ways that I celebrate what is *good* and *true* with you. Love is found in the ways that we bear with one another through difficult times. The ways that we *believe* in each other, or even *believe* each other, giving each other the benefit of the doubt. The ways that we hope for one another and stick with one another, no matter what.

That is what it means to love. What would it look like in our current political climate if we could love one another in a way that did not insist on *my own* way but was open to the other? And don’t sit there and think, “Yeah, that’d be great if *they* did that.” If the *other side* didn’t insist on their own way. I’m talking to *you*. Like Paul says, “So far as it depends on *you*, live peaceably with all.”

I think that one of the reasons we *like* to think about love as a feeling or emotion is because it makes it *easier* for us. It lets us off the hook. It allows us to say, “Yeah, I’m a loving person. I *love*. I love my *spouse* and my *kids*, and I even love my *enemy*. I *feel* love for them. I *care* about them. I have love in my heart for them,” even if I do not act in ways that show it. I can say, “I love you,” and still act in ways that are *impatient* and *unkind* and boastful and arrogant and rude and irritable and resentful. I can *say* it and *feel* it but not have to change anything about

the way that I *live* and *act*. Love is not just caring *about* people. It's caring *for* them. And that's different. "I care about my spouse." Yeah, but do you care *for* them? "I care about my kids." Yeah, but do you care *for* them? "I care about my enemy." Yeah, but do you care *for* them? It's like saying, "I want to be a vessel of love," right after you hit someone.

So love is found in the things that we *do*, in the ways that we act with patience and kindness and hope. And what Jesus says is, it's pretty easy to do that with the people we *like* and get along with; the people who love *us*. But Christ calls us to be that way with our *enemies*. With the people we do *not* like or agree with or get along with. With the people who hurt us.

Now, we have to pause right there, because that can open up some problems. To say that we are supposed to act in ways that are patient and kind with a spouse or a parent that *abuses* you? You're supposed to *bear with* that and *endure* that in order to be loving? I don't pretend to know the mind of Christ, but I have a hard time imagining that he would endorse that. I mean, Paul says that love does not rejoice in *wrongdoing* but rejoices in the *truth*, and the truth that Christ *has* shown us is that *violence* – in any form, whether physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – is never *right*. It is *never* the loving way. Christ rejected that with his *life* and his *death*.

Author Jocelyn Soriano writes that "To love your enemies is *not* to consent to evil or to rejoice at the damage it has done. It is *not* to remain in a state of being abused. It is *not* to stop seeking relief. It is *not* to hinder justice. To love your enemies is to stop the cycle of pain, hate, and suffering. It is to show mercy. It is to guard your peace and to protect the joy in your heart. It is to flee from the stain of sin." To love the people who hurt us is to say, "I do not have to put up with this, but I will also not respond like *you*." I will not respond with *violence*. I will not respond with *hate*. As Paul writes, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what

is noble in the sight of all.” The word Paul uses there for *noble* is the Greek word *kala*, and it means, “good, *better*, honorable, and beautiful.” *Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is better and beautiful.* As he says, “Do not be overcome by *evil*, but overcome evil with *good*.”

Paul also writes, “Never avenge yourself, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is *mine*, I will repay, says the Lord.’” And the Lord may choose not to. But that’s not our business. We are simply called to *trust God* and to act in ways that show God’s love as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Now, here’s the crazy thing. We are listening to *Paul* talk about how to live in love; about loving our enemies and not hurting them. And the thing is, Paul *did* hurt his enemies. He *persecuted* and *hunted down* and *attacked* and *arrested* the people he disagreed with. He stood by and watched as Stephen was murdered for being a Christian. He held their coats while they threw stones at him. Paul *was* the very way he is telling us *not* to be. But somewhere along the way, he *changed*. He had an encounter with the risen and ascended Christ in which Christ said, “Why are you persecuting me?” Why are you persecuting *me*? Because as we do to one of the least of those who are children of God created in the image of God, we do to *God*. And even our enemies are created in the image of God.

If *Paul* could change, then there is hope for the rest of us. If Paul could open himself up to the other and live from a place of love, of acting with patience and kindness and hope, then it’s not too late for *us* to become more loving people, more patient people, kinder people, less irritable people, less resentful people, more hopeful people. To live in love is a transformative process.

But it is a *process*. And so we do have to address real quick what Jesus says at the end of Matthew's reading. He says, "Be *perfect*, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

I am striving to become a more loving person. I'm doing the best that I can. But I know that I am far from *perfect*. And I'm going to assume that you would say the same. But this word *perfect* is one of the *worst* translations from Greek to English in the entire Bible. The Greek word is *teleioi*, and it more accurately means, "complete or mature." That's not just me trying to get out of being perfect. That's actually what it means! Jesus has just said, "God makes the sun rise on the evil *and* on the good. God makes the rain fall on the righteous *and* on the unrighteous. Be *complete*, therefore, as God is complete. Love *all* people – your friends *and* your enemies – completely. Be *mature* in your love." And maturity is a *process*.

Pastor and author Andy Stanley says that "The essence of Christian maturity is not our invisible love for invisible God. The essence of Christian maturity is when a person can love another person who is difficult to love. *That* is when you know you're making progress."

Jesus Christ shows us what perfect, complete, mature love looks like. He shows us in his life. He shows us in his death. He shows us in this meal. And what he shows us is that *love* is *cruciform*. You ask, "What does love look like?" It looks like Christ on the cross, his body broken and his blood shed, not for the *righteous*, but for *sinners*. It looks like a man being killed by those who hate him and saying, "Father, *forgive them*." Not *smite* them or *strike them down*. *Forgive* them. And it is in this meal that Christ nourishes and strengthens and cultivates *our* faith, that *we* might grow into that same maturity and completeness of love.

Love *will* make us do crazy things. Like loving our enemies. Praying for them. Feeding them. Forgiving them. Being patient and kind toward people with whom that is *very* hard. But that is the love that God has shown *us* in Jesus Christ. May we be so crazy as to be more like him. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.