

Election Sermon Series

What the Bible Says about...Love – Matt. 5:43-48

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Well, this one should be easy, right? What does the Bible say about love? I John 4:8: “God is love.” Matthew 22: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” I Corinthians 13: “Love is patient, love is kind.” Matthew 5:44 “Love your enemies.” Wait...what? Is Jesus serious here? The reason we have enemies in the first place is so we don’t have to love them. Life is so much more black and white when we know who’s on our side and who’s on the other side. I mean, I know we’re supposed to love our neighbor, even though that’s challenging enough. But our enemies?

I said last week that for this sermon series leading up to the election, I’m not going to put forward any personal opinions or voting guides. I’m simply going to hide behind the words of scripture and a few select spiritual authors who are much wiser than me. Y’all have brains, you can decide for yourselves for whom you want to vote. My goal is to give you some foundational grounding on what the Bible says about fundamental issues at the center of this election. When considering the issues, the policies, the personalities, the character of the candidates, who role should your faith play?

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor (which is in the Bible) and hate your enemy (which isn’t).’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Says it right there in the Bible. It’s even in red letters, which means it’s really important. And yet, love seems like a scarce commodity these days. We need a refresher course on what it means to love one another, because it feels like we’ve forgotten. Technology and social media have made it easy for our dark sides to come to light, because we can share our most divisive, most hateful comments without fear of repercussion. In fact, I would say we’ve sometimes used our love of God as a reason to hate our enemies, because they don’t love the same God we do, or don’t love God in the same way we do, or don’t support the candidate that loves God the same way we do. But that’s not the kind of love the Bible calls us to have.

Spiritual writer Henry Nouwen knows about this challenge we face. He writes, “Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear and do harm.” Pretty spot-on, right? That was written in the 1970s, and yet it could have been written yesterday.

Here’s another quote, courtesy of author Phillip Gulley: “For many, religion is how we decide who to love and who to hate.” Sit with that one a second. As a loving Christian, I want to argue with him, but history shows otherwise. In fact, here’s a very unscientific list of the people I know who have been hated in the name of religion: the pagans, the Samaritans, the Jews, the Muslims, women, Protestants, the Jews again, divorced people, indigenous people, the Muslims again, people who dare to translate the Bible into English, the Jews again, black people, people who dance and play cards, homosexuals and members of the LGBTIA+ community, people of a different political persuasion, and lets go ahead and throw the Jews and Muslims in there one more time. History shows that Christians have a poor record of finding motivation for loving these people but have found ample reasons – based in scripture – for hating them.

What we need to name today is that any justification for hating someone that is rooted in scripture is sinful, because the Bible is clear throughout that hate has no place in God's kingdom. Instead, God's kingdom is characterized as a place where love abounds. The Bible doesn't just say that God is loving, which of course God is. It doesn't say God loves, which of course God does. It says God is love. So if God is love, and we are created in the image of God, then that means we are created to love. Even our enemies.

I wonder if you had the same initial reaction to this passage that I did. "Enemies? I don't have any enemies. I have some folks I don't like. There are a few folks that I'd rather cross the street than talk with. The most challenging people to love are those who root for the wrong sports teams. But I don't think I have any enemies." Webster's defines an enemy as, "A person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone." Do you have any enemies?

Well...the word "enemy" has been used in this campaign to define people who actively oppose one of the candidates. And I don't think it's a far stretch to find something to actively oppose in both candidates' policy positions, depending on your perspective. For myself, I want to actively oppose candidates who support policies that could harm or negatively affect people I love. You might feel the same way about either candidate. And there I people I know who are going to vote for those candidates I oppose. Does that mean we have enemies?

And what do we do when it's our neighbor, who we are called to love, who's on the opposite side of the aisle from us? The person on our street, at work, sitting next to us at the family Thanksgiving meal, who actively opposes something in which you believe strongly. How do you love your neighbor when they are also your enemy? Well, maybe one solution is to acknowledge that before anyone is our enemy, they are our neighbor.

That realization should provide the foundation from which we interact with those who are actively opposed to us, our beliefs, our political choices. In our world it's normal to return love for love and hate for hate. But Jesus says if you only love those who love you, you're not better than the people you hate, because that's what they do. Instead, we are not only called to love them but to pray for them, and not something like, "God, I pray that you would be fully present with my enemy to help them see how totally wrong they are about everything and that if they don't change their ways you're gonna infest their house with termites and flood them with 'Scam Likely' calls. God bless their hearts."

Jesus isn't asking us to love our enemies like we love our families and friends. Jesus isn't asking us to like our enemies, because that would sometimes be impossible. Liking someone is based on sentiment and emotion; loving them is based on seeing them as a child of God. And you can't pray for someone if you don't love them. I want you to think of someone in your life you know is going to vote for the other person. How does that make you feel? Do you feel your heart rate going up a bit, your dander rising? Think of that person for a second, picture them, preferably without devil's horns. Got someone? Good. Now realize you're that person for someone else. You're the one doing the opposing in their eyes. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. Praying for someone acknowledges our common humanity, even when so many other things divide us. Martin Luther King, in his book "Strength to Love," says it this way: "Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies – or else? The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars – must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation." Is it more Christ-like to lock up our enemies or to love them?

It's important to note that the word Jesus used in Matthew for "love" is the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* is a selfless, other-focused love that sees the other person as the neighbor first. It's

the highest form of love. At the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes, “Faith, hope, and *agape* remain, but the greatest of these is *agape*.” Love is what we lead with. When you lead with love, lines you’ve drawn to divide you from others are erased. When lead with love, you don’t seek to create hierarchies among people of different races (“there is neither Jew or Greek”). When you lead with love, you don’t seek to create hierarchies among people of different socio-economic situations (“there is neither slave nor free”). When you lead with love, you don’t seek to create hierarchies among people of different genders (“there is neither male nor female”).

“*Agape* your enemies.” It’s only *agape* love that can take a gathering of differently-minded individuals and mold them into a beloved community. It’s only *agape* love that can heal the wounds of segregation and alienation between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, black and white, left and right, gay and straight, rich and poor. It’s only *agape* love that gives us the courage to seek solidarity with the suffering, to have compassion toward enemies, to stoop down and serve the least of these. Our beliefs won’t do that for us if they are not grounded in God’s love for us and for each other.

There are plenty of reasons to hate in this world right now, and there are plenty of people who we feel deserve to be hated. But if we choose to see those who believe differently than us as enemies, we aren’t following Christ’s lead. That doesn’t mean we stay silent. Just the opposite. Jesus spoke up against those who were seeking to persecute and exclude. We absolutely should stand up against anyone who claims that hate is a part of faith. We have to lift up our voices on behalf of those who are drowned out by racist chants. We have to have the courage to say that all people matter to God, especially those who are told they don’t matter by others. We have to not only say with our mouths but live out with our hands and feet the most basic, fundamental fact of scripture: “God is love.”

We are being told that there are people in our country we should hate, and some of us want to hate the people who are telling us to hate others. They feel like enemies to us or to those we love. And yet, I want to close, not with my words, but with the words of a man who understood the destructive power of hate and the healing power of love, Dr. Martin Luther King: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” “Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.” “I have decided to stick to love...Hate is too great a burden to bear.”