

**Love In Particular**

*Matthew 5:43-48*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Will you pray with me?

*Loving God –*

*In this time together, let the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of all our hearts*

*be acceptable and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

*And if they be pleasing, let them find expression through our lives.*

*Amen.*

Fred Craddock once recounted a conversation he had with New Testament scholar, Gene Boring. He says:

“When Gene was still a student at Vanderbilt, he served a little church in Dover, Tennessee. It was a little wood frame church that had two doors – two entrance doors in the front. And the people there loved to tell the story of when the Civil War was on and the battle was raging there around Nashville and Dover and in that area.

And at Christmas time of 1863, the Union soldiers and the Confederate soldiers met at that little church, stacked their rifles outside those two doors. Union soldiers went in one door, Confederate soldiers in the other door. And they shared a Christmas Eve service. 1863. Came out, picked up their rifles, and the next day were at battle again.

They loved to tell that story.

Gene said that when he went there, he called attention to the cornerstone of that church that said the church began in 1866.

And the people looked at him, level-gazed, and said, ‘We know.’

Some people love their stories whether they’re true or not.” (Craddock, “John: Finally Accepting Grace as Grace,” lecture delivered at *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* on March 8, 1991).

Maybe, we feel something like that when we talk about these words from Jesus. We love to point at them as the high ideal of Christianity: *love your enemies*. But *who* do you know that’s actually able to do it? If you’re like me, I’ll bet your list is real short.

We good church people like to tell ourselves we could love our enemies, whether it’s true or not.

So, this is probably an opportune time for me to make a confession: I don't love humankind. Is that bad for a pastor to say? I don't love humankind. I'm sorry, but it's true. I don't hate it, but I can't say with a level gaze that I love it, either.

And here's the thing: neither do you. Because the truth is, it's impossible to love humankind. Or, at least that's true if we take the word *love* seriously.

Can you love 8.3 billion people? That's the estimated population of the world right now: 8.3 billion. Can you love 8.3 billion individuals?

Maybe you think you can, but I'm guessing what you're calling love is probably something else entirely. Maybe you hope for the common good of all 8.3 billion, for peace for our world, for the thriving of all people, but that's a pretty far cry from *loving* them.

It's easy to say that we love people *in the abstract*.

You know the famous line from the Peanuts comic strip. Lucy has called herself a doctor of psychiatry and sits at her roadside booth. And she tells her brother, "You could never be a doctor. You don't love humanity."

Linus says, "I love humanity. It's *people* I can't stand."

That's our problem, too! We love the *idea* of humankind, but then people keep getting in the way.

And yet, it turns out that love cannot be done abstractly or theoretically. Try it. Try saying to your spouse or your partner or your child or your mother or father or friend. Try saying to them: "I love you, but in an abstract sort of way." See how that goes. See if they reciprocate.

When we operate on the notion of love as abstract ideal without any feet on the ground, any skin in the game, our words become cheap. We can say, "I love you" a hundred times, but it means nothing if our concrete actions do not align with what comes out of our mouths.

Rabbi Avi Weiss's father was the Ashkenazi Rabbi of Natanya in Israel. And at that time, Rabbi Weiss was the only one of their children living in New York. So, when his parents would come to visit him from Israel it was quite an honor.

Before one visit to the States, his dad calls and says, "Look Avi, we've changed our plans and instead of coming in on Thursday, we're coming Wednesday morning. Can you please pick us up from the airport?"

Rabbi Weiss replies, “Papa, you know how much I love you, you know how much I love Mommy... I was able to pick you up on Thursday but I can’t make it Wednesday morning.”

His dad says, “Avrumi! You know your mother is not well. You know it is hard for us to schlep all our stuff and hail a cab. Please Avrumi, pick us up!”

“But Papa, I’m sorry, I can’t make it. I’ll send someone.”

“Avrumi, you’re now a hotshot rabbi in Brooklyn New York and you don’t have time to pick your parents up at the airport?”

“Papa, you know how much I love, but...”

“Avrumi, do me a favor. Don’t love me so much and just pick us up at the airport!”

When we speak too casually about love in an abstract way – as a concept, as an ideal – we run the risk of mistaking what we *think* about love for the act of actually *doing it*.

Jesus calls us to a life of love *lived out*. And, in the Sermon on the Mount, as he so often does, he calls us to an even more demanding kind of love. He says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” – that means those who wish you ill, those who mean you harm, those who belittle you, who betray you, who hurt you and, given the chance, would hurt you again. Love those people, too – “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Let’s be honest: it is hard enough, sometimes, to love people we actually *like*, let alone people we don’t and especially people who don’t like us. So, what happens to your love when the bully, the abuser, the backstabber, the coward, the gossip, the racist, the cruel, the unsparing, the uncaring, the spiteful point their mean-spirited ways at you?

The high ideal – the high watermark – that Jesus holds us to is *more* than refusing to return antagonism for antagonism. It’s more than simply tolerating them. It’s even more than remaining neutral towards them. What Jesus teaches is for his disciples to return love for hate. What he teaches is active good will toward the ones who are actively against us.

The now retired Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, tells this story from his college days:

“One Sunday evening, a fellow student barged in my dorm room, fell into a chair, and with a dazed look on his face, said:

‘Give me a cigarette! Guess who I just sat across from on the flight from D.C. back to Greenville? Martin. Luther. KING. Just like he looks on TV! He slumped in his seat as

soon as he got on the plane. Looked *real* tired. So I didn't bother him. Finally, I got up the nerve to speak. "Dr. King... i-it's an honor to meet you. I-I'm active for the cause at my college. Wofford. I'm coming from a training session in Washington. I-I really appreciate what you're doing."

'Unbelievable!' a wide-eyed Willimon replied. 'What did Dr. King say to you?'

'Nothing. So I said, "Dr. King, my father is a farmer in low-country South Carolina. *He's such a racist!* I've tried to talk to him. I've tried to explain why the fight for racial justice is so important! But he says terrible things. I'm not going home for Thanksgiving — because I don't want anything to do with such a red-neck, racist old fool!"

That's when Dr. King lunged across the aisle, grabbed my arm, and said in a voice loud enough to wake the whole plane, "You got to *love* your daddy!" And then, he went back to sleep until we landed'" (Willimon, *Accidental Preacher*, ch. 3).

King could say that and mean it, even for someone who was actively against him, because he understood that the only way to change the heart of someone is through love: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only *love* can do that."

Jesus' command to love our enemies is about more than fostering tolerance for others. It's about actively seeking the good for those who would not do the same for us — even for those who are actively against us.

And if you think this conversation isn't directly relevant to our lives, then let's talk the current state of American politics for minute. Let's talk about how our politicians speak about those across the aisle from them. Let's talk about how our pundits speak about those who think differently than them. Let's talk about how *we* speak about people who disagree with us. We used to debate ideas. Now we just attack people's personhood.

"You disagree with me on that topic. Well, you're an *idiot*. So why do I care what you think?" We attack *the person*, demoralize *the person*, demean *the person*.

You see, it's one thing to talk about Jesus' command to love our enemies in the abstract. It's something entirely different to put it into practice and make it real in this world.

But it's quite a leap, isn't it, to go from some days barely being able to love those we *like*, let alone those we actively *dislike*? So how do we do it? How do we actually begin to live into this essential Christian ideal?

Let me say, I don't think it happens all at once. I don't think anybody wakes up one morning and just decides it is so. Rather, I think learning to love our enemies is more like running a marathon or hiking a fourteener or eating an elephant. You do it one step at a time and one bite at a time. There are no shortcuts. You just spend a lifetime of putting one foot in front of the other as you climb towards that summit.

But one thing is certain: you can talk about the summit as much as you want, but you will never reach the summit if you don't take the first step.

Homer and Emmy Lou were spending some time together on the front porch swing. Now Homer was very much in love with his beautiful Emmy Lou. However, he was shy and often had difficulty mustering up the courage to express his love in a physical way. Aware of his inability, he spent a lot of time talking to her about it, expressing his affection with flowery words:

"Emmy Lou, if I had a thousand eyes, they would all be gazing at you."

"Emmy Lou, if I had a thousand arms, they would all be hugging you."

"Emmy Lou, if I had a thousand lips, they would all be kissing you!"

One day, Emmy Lou, having had enough and on the verge of losing her patience, looked at Homer and said, "Homer, stop complaining about what you don't have and start using what you do have!"

How many opportunities do we miss by focusing on our inadequacies?

How often do we end up doing nothing, because the call to love our enemies seems so daunting – so we never take the first step?

Jesus' call is for us to not just talk about love in the abstract, but to pull it down out of the ethers and put it into practice, here and now, in the particular.

And if the idea of trying to love your enemies seems intimidating to you, know that you're in good company. Not a person who's done it has thought it was easy.

But, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, offered us a good road map for how to do it. He said:

*Do all the good you can,  
by all the means you can,  
in all the ways you can,  
in all the places you can,  
at all the times you can,  
to all the people you can,  
as long as ever you can.*

If you live your life like that every day, then in the moment when you are confronted by your enemy, there will be no question as to how you will respond – because it will have become fixed in you like muscle memory.

You will do them good. And in so doing, everyone will know Whose child you are.

Amen.