

## **JESUS IS ASKING**

***<sup>46</sup> “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”***

Dear Friends in Christ,

When I read the words of today’s text I was reminded of an incident which occurred many years ago, an incident I don’t think I’ll ever forget. It happened in a little church in a little town in Iowa in the Spring of 1970 when college campuses around the country had just shut down because of the Kent State incident and “student activists” were feeling empowered and emboldened. Many left their colleges that spring with the intent to disrupt and bring disorder to normal society.

In this little church, in a little town in Iowa, Sunday service started as usual with the singing of an opening hymn. During the hymn there was a slight commotion at the entry door and in walked a long-haired, bare foot, bearded guy dressed in torn jeans and a work shirt, wearing a bunch of strands of beads around his neck and a bright red bandana on his head. My personal guess was that this young man was a trouble-maker, and that he was up to no good.

Not content with sitting in the back of the church, this long-haired character ambled down the center aisle and with a lot of show, sat down on the floor right in the front of the sanctuary. The organist kept playing and we kept singing but out of the corner of my eye I saw another figure heading down the center aisle. It was the large figure of a man we all knew as Lyle. There was no mistaking Lyle. He was a very big man.

Many years earlier when Lyle had played football at Iowa State he was the largest player on the team roster. He was still a big man and even though he was now over 70 and slowed down by arthritis and the effects of some farming accidents, he was still a formidable character. And as the chairman of the Board of Elders for many years, Lyle was recognized as a leader in the church.

Old Lyle came down the center aisle at a good clip and we could see he had something in his hand. We just knew Lyle could take care of this young trouble-maker. Lyle got to the front of the church and just towered over the outsider. I could imagine Lyle picking the guy up by the scruff of his neck, marching him to the back door and depositing him in the parking lot. As we all watched Lyle lowered himself down on his arthritic knees and sat on the floor next to the young man. He opened up the hymnal he had with him and shared it with the guy. For the entire service, Old Lyle sat on the floor cross-legged, next to the young man. When the service was over Lyle lumbered down the aisle with the young man and took him down to the basement for coffee and cookies. As far as I know, the young man never returned to that little church.

Whether he had come to instigate trouble or just out of curiosity he was met with friendship and love. It's an incident I'll never forget.

Today Jesus asks

<sup>46</sup> *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?"*

<sup>47</sup> *"And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"*

Jesus spoke these words to his followers in what we now call the 'Sermon on the Mount.' He introduced some radical ideas with these words, radical ideas about love. As we saw in today's Old Testament lesson and again in the Epistle lesson, the 'Royal Law' "Love your neighbor as yourself" had been the rule since before the time of Moses. Problem was, the Jews of Jesus' day had a narrow understanding of the term 'neighbor.' They understood their 'neighbor' to be fellow Jews, people just like them.

They were under the false impression that they did not have to love those who were not Jews, who were different. They drew the incorrect inference that God hated Gentiles and all other non-Jews and therefore the Jews also were to hate them as enemies. So the Jews considered all the Gentiles to be their enemies. *"But I tell you,"* Jesus said, *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . ."* God never intended for His people to be a people of hate, they were to be examples of love. They were to show love not only to those who were their friends but even to those who wished them evil.

It's easier to be loving and friendly to people you know, people like yourself," Jesus says, "people who love you in return." But this type of love is nothing more than the ordinary self-centered love that's common to everyone. Loving those who are lovable in return is something even tax-collectors, the villainous traitors who extorted money from their fellow-Jews, even tax-collectors and pagan unbelievers did that. Their kind of love was completely selfish, but genuine love is totally unselfish. The citizens of God's kingdom are to have a much higher standard of love than the rest of the world.

When he says, "Love your enemies" the word Jesus uses does not mean 'to love' in the sense of liking or being fond of someone. It means to recognize your enemies as they are and to do whatever you can to make them as God wants them to be. It means to be concerned, not about revenge, but about your enemies' welfare, especially their eternal welfare. The type of love believers are to have for our enemies is to be the same type of love that God has for us.

God is the source of love. Not only does true love come from God, but even the ability to love comes from God. 1 John 4:9-10 (NIV) <sup>9</sup> *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* <sup>10</sup> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

The ultimate expression of love was God sending Jesus to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The death that Jesus suffered on the cross not only paid for your sins, through faith in Jesus you became a New Creation, clothed in his righteousness. This New Creation in you wants to do God's will. You (your New Creation) now has the ability to love. And this is your motive to love: *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* 1 John 4:11 (NIV).

Your love for others, even your love for an enemy, is your faith-based response to God's love for you. God's love for you is the only motive that compels you to love one another. Jesus calls us to a higher love. It's easy to love those who go to our church, who dress the way we do, who think the way we do, who worship the way that we do. But what happens when you encounter someone who doesn't think or act the same way you do? Who doesn't worship or talk or even dress the way you do? It's a natural human tendency to avoid people who are different for the most part, isn't it? I'm not saying that it's right. But I am saying it's a natural human tendency to only want to associate with those who are just like us, and to avoid those who are different.

What's even worse is when this avoidance, this turning away from someone different happens within the congregation of believers. From time to time we get just such "visitors" on a Sunday morning. What's your reaction when one of those people 'happen' in here? Disgust? Avoidance at all cost? It's not my job to say hi to such a person! What if that person I greet expects to sit with me in church? How would I get rid of him? Oh there are a couple members at Grace who seem to like to deal with these types. I'll let them handle him.

I just said "It's a natural human tendency to avoid people who are different." What I mean to say is that it's a natural, SELFISH human tendency to avoid people who are different. People who look and act and dress like us are welcomed pretty much everywhere, at the Mormon church, at the Elks club, at any Christian church. It is the mark of believers to show love to all, even those who are different. But it takes effort on the part of believers. You will need to step out of your "comfort zone" to associate with someone you don't know, especially if they appear different. You will have to be less selfish of yourself and of your time. And remember, genuine love is totally unselfish.

Humanly speaking, more people have been brought into the church by the kindness of Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world. Conversely, more people have been driven from the church by the unfriendliness and uncaring attitude, by harsh or unkind words, by the "closed club" impression of congregational members, than by all the doubts in the world.

There is a tendency to think of church membership like that of a country club. We like to have people join with us who are intelligent and well-dressed and model citizens, like us. We feel comfortable around them. They are our kind of people. But the church is not a country club. The church is more like a MASH unit. Maybe you're familiar with the term "MASH unit" from the movie and the TV show by that name. MASH stands for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and it refers to a U.S. Army medical unit serving as a fully functional hospital in a combat zone.

Think of the church as a MASH unit where people come for healing and health and life. You and I came to the church for life. You and I were once dead, spiritually dead. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins*, Ephesians 2:1 (NIV). We were made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace. We are alive but we still need the regular care of the Great Physician. We need constant strengthening of our faith through the “medicine” of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. From time to time we need personal help from one of the Great Physician’s helpers.

Occasionally some of the “walking wounded,” from the combat zone that is the world, will find their way into our unit. Sometimes they are in rough shape and need a lot of attention. They may not even know how bad off they are spiritually. They may have all sorts of wrong ideas about their Savior and about God’s plan of salvation. They may even be involved in some sort of sinful lifestyle and not even know they are sinning. It’s our calling to minister to these souls. No, let me be even more specific. It’s YOUR calling to minister to these souls even if they are very different from you in dress and manners and speech. It is your calling to love these souls as God loves you.

Loving others as God loves you is evidence of your love for God. One of the most common and most damaging criticisms of Christianity is the charge that Christians do not live up to their faith. Even though the world has a limited and often distorted idea of what the gospel is, they know enough about the teachings of Christ and the life of Christ to realize that most people who go by His name do not do all that He commanded and do not live as He lived. It’s easy to show love to the lovable. But showing love to the “unlovable” is the mark of a Christian who is living for Christ. Remember, when Jesus died for you, you were still an unlovable creature. Romans 5:8 . . . *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. When Jesus died for you he also died for that unlovable person who may cross your path some day. God values the soul of that person. That person who is uncomfortable for you to be around is a soul Christ considered worthy of his love and worthy of his death.

Verse 48, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. The perfection that is God is utterly impossible to us sinful humans. Our own righteousness is so imperfect that it is worthless; God’s righteousness is impossible for the very reason that it is perfect. But the impossible righteousness of God becomes possible for those who trust in Jesus Christ, because Jesus gives each believer, he clothes each believer in his perfect righteousness.

But the word translated as ‘perfect’ has an additional thought. ‘Perfect’ in English is usually understood to mean “flawless, beyond reproach, beyond improvement.” In addition to that meaning, in the original language, the word also carries with it the idea of being “complete, whole, all-encompassing.” Within these verses, then, Jesus can be seen as calling us to a love that is all-encompassing – a love that reaches to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. The kind of love that Jesus is calling us to is the same love God has for you: a love based not on who you are, or what you do, or how you look, or what you wear, but a love based on his grace alone.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, your love for us is beyond description. It is your grace which has saved us through faith in Jesus. May your love for us kindle in us a love for others, especially for those who most in need of love whether in this church or in our daily life. Use us to the glory of your name and the advancement of your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.