

The Rev. Dr. Stephen H. Applegate
 Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
 February 23, 2025
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church
 Cleveland Heights

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. . . If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Luke 6:27, 32, 35

I've purposely taken snippets from this morning's Gospel reading as my text for this sermon in order to focus our attention on love. In today's passage, which comes from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks his disciples to do all kinds of things – to bless people who curse them, pray for people who abuse them, turn the other cheek, and lend to anyone who asks them for something they have. We could profitably talk about any one of these acts, but I want to talk about love, particularly about the command that is – at least in my opinion – pretty much impossible to obey: the command to love my enemies.

Love is a single word with a lot of different meanings. There's romantic love – the love that's the subject of countless songs – the ones where we're told that love is a many splendored thing, that love hurts, that love makes the world go 'round, and that everybody loves somebody sometime.

Many songs ask questions about romantic love, questions like: Will you still love me tomorrow? Can you feel the love tonight? And what's love got to do with it? There's Bob Dylan's Is your love in vain? The Bee Gees' How deep is your love? And there are artists as dissimilar as Bob Marley and Whitesnake who get right to the point when they ask in song: “Is this love?” Cole Porter asked pretty much the same question, but in his more elegant Cole Porter way: “What is this thing called love?”

I can say with complete assurance that romantic love is alive and well. As many of you know, I live above a supermarket – Meijer's Fairfax Market at the corner of 105th and Cedar. The store was completely transformed during the days leading up to Valentine's Day: there were bouquets of roses, heart shaped balloons, funny greeting cards, sincere greeting cards, risqué greeting cards, and chocolate gifts of every possible kind. I had just gone down to buy a half gallon of milk, not remembering that I would have to wade through Valentine Central.

Love was even featured at the Super Bowl this year – and no I'm not talking about the speculation that Cleveland Heights native Travis Kelce would propose to T. Swift at halftime. No, I'm talking about a love that's different from romantic love. You see, love made it onto the field.

If you looked closely at the end zones when the Eagles were scoring touchdown after touchdown, you may have seen that one endzone was stenciled with a message: IT TAKES ALL OF US, while the other endzone said, CHOOSE LOVE.

The end zone that said “Choose Love” led Scott Simon, the longtime host of NPR’s Weekend Edition, to ask a question. “You may wonder:” he said, “how are professional football players, who are paid gobs of money to bash, thrash, and smash each other before a vast, worldwide audience, supposed to represent choosing love?” It’s a darn good question.

After sharing some creative – and pretty funny – thoughts about how the two teams might do something that’s so clearly at odds with the physical violence of the game of football, Simon ended his commentary by imagining a different conclusion to the game: “The two Super Bowl teams suddenly see their highly-promoted competition as trivial stuff, compared to the great game of life. They heed the commandment in the end zone to choose love.”

Well, I can tell you it’s unlikely that the National Football League got the idea of choosing love from Jesus, but their Super Bowl message isn’t all that far removed from what Jesus was telling his disciples – and, therefore, telling all of us: Choose love. The question is, what might that look like? Or to borrow Scott Simon’s question: how are we supposed to represent choosing love?

Let’s begin by understanding what exactly Jesus is talking about when he uses the word love. It’s important to be clear because there are no fewer than six words in the Bible that have been translated into our one English word, “love.” Two of the six words come from the Hebrew Scriptures. Four of them come from the Christian Scriptures. My guess is that, in the past, someone has spoken from this very pulpit about some of the different words for love from the Greek New Testament. There’s *eros* of course. Our word erotic is derived from it. Enough said. There’s *charitas* – a word that’s sometimes translated “charity.” Charitas has the sense of a generous, freely given, gift. Think grace.

There’s *phileo*, a word now associated most of the time with brotherly or sibling love. You know, Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love.

However, none of these words is the one Jesus uses when he tells his disciples to love their enemies. Jesus uses the fourth New Testament word for love instead – a word you have probably heard before. The word is *agape*. It’s the word associated with God’s unconditional, unbreakable relationship of love, kindness, and mercy with us so that we might live together with righteousness, justice, harmony and well-being.

When Jesus quoted the Great Commandment from Deuteronomy and Leviticus about loving our neighbors as ourselves, *agape* is the word he used for “love.”

Thou shalt *agape* the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it, thou shalt *agape* thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophet.” To choose the kind of love Jesus is talking about in today’s Gospel reading, is to choose to love our

enemies in the same way we love God and our neighbor. And that, my siblings in Christ, is a very tall order indeed.

We can begin to appreciate how hard it would have been for those who were listening to Jesus speak. Think about who would have been striking one of those early Jesus followers on the cheek. At the time of Jesus those who struck you on your cheek or took away your coat were masters or soldiers.

We know that some, if not many, of the first followers of Jesus were slaves. Masters could strike a slave on one cheek with the back of their hand as a way of punishing the slave for disobedience or insubordination. The penalty was both painful and humiliating. It was *intended* to be both painful and humiliating! And yet, here's Jesus telling his followers to "turn the other cheek."

Similarly, not just anyone would take away your coat. Typically, this person would be a soldier, and the taking of the coat would be a form of extortion: "Give me your coat or else X will happen." The soldiers would have been Roman soldiers – certainly seen as the enemy by many, if not most of the first Christians. And yet, here's Jesus telling his followers to give away their shirts, too, if someone demanded to have their coats. Turn the other cheek, Jesus? Really? Love my enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return? Come on.

Here's a story from just this past fall that illustrates how far from loving my enemies I am. They say "confession is good for the soul," so here goes. . . After Labor Day, the campaigns for national, state, and local candidates and issues were gearing up for the final push toward Election Day: buying ads, passing out yard signs, holding rallies – everything was in full swing. At the meeting of the West Mission Area clericus of this diocese, the clergy were anticipating and preparing for what we knew was going to be a challenging time. What were we going to do? And how were we going to respond to what was sure to be a divisive season ahead?

A couple of the clergy basically said, I'm going to dig a proverbial hole and crawl into it. I'm going to try to pretend that what's going on outside my church building isn't happening. Others talked about what they were planning to do during their adult forums or other formation activities.

For example, at Trinity Toledo, we decided to do a series on Civic Life & Faith, with sessions about American Civil Religion, learning to disagree, spiritual disciplines and practices, and the rise of Christian nationalism.

One rector brought to the group what her church was going to do. They were going to have a campaign called the Neighbor to Neighbor initiative – an initiative to encourage people to love their neighbors despite their differences. Would the other Episcopal clergy sign on in support? And would we be willing to pass out the lawn signs the initiative was having printed – lime green signs that had a red heart on them. Driving by what you would see was "♥ your neighbor."

I told the rector – who was and is a good friend – that I'd have to think about whether Trinity could support what her church was doing. Now, on the one hand, it seemed like an easy thing

to do. Heart your neighbor – what could be more Christian? In fact, Heart your neighbor didn't go nearly as far as Jesus does in today's Gospel. Jesus says Heart your enemy!

I thought and prayed about it and talked with the wardens and vestry about it. Our discernment led us to say, "No, we couldn't sign on." You see, Trinity had become a safe place for LGBTQIA+ people.

The senior warden was a married lesbian, and the junior warden was a married gay man. Several members were trans, and before she left, the former rector had celebrated the Episcopal Church's beautiful renaming liturgy for a member. It's a service for blessing someone who has taken or been given a new name." The ceremony can be used for many reasons, including divorce, or choosing a new name, or a gender transition. The service the rector celebrated from the church's Book of Occasional Services was because a person had transitioned.

So many painful statements were being made about people who were different in some of the campaigns; so much hatred was being directed at those who were members of Trinity, and so many people were being "othered" that we couldn't bring ourselves to say we could Heart our neighbors.

Was this unchristian? We certainly could have been accused of being unchristian – unchristian like the person whose house I drove by last October – and I wish I'd taken a picture – who had proudly displayed a Heart your neighbor sign in their yard right alongside some of the most revolting and vile yard signs that said detestable things about several different marginalized groups of people.

So, how do we ♥ our enemies and also honor our baptismal promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

Let me say two things as we come to the end of this sermon: the first is that loving your neighbor – or your enemy for that matter – does not mean being a doormat. It would be unchristian, not to mention unconscionable, to tell a woman in an abusive relationship that if her abuser struck her on the right cheek, she should offer him the left also. As Christians we must always oppose evil and stand with those who have been the victims of it. Loving one's enemy does not mean allowing that person to disrespect the dignity of another person – or of any human being. In the end, this was the reason we didn't feel we could sign on to the Neighbor to Neighbor program *as a church*. Individual members were welcome to join and many did.

The second thing is this: If we do *agape* our enemies, then the ways we express our dislike and opposition will always also express our total desiring of their well-being so that **the whole world might be well**. Our goal and total desire are to be in the relationship with them that God desires for both of us. Easy-peasy? Absolutely not!

Amen.