

“For the Love of..” Reformation Sunday  
(25Oct2020) Mt22:34-46; Lev19:1-2,15-18; Ps46

I noticed this week that the original hosts of the MCC, our siblings at Covenant Presbyterian, have a new banner in their lawn. It says, “Love your neighbor. No exceptions.”

Whizzing by on a bike, I briefly thought it said “No expectations.” But it actually sets high expectations. Love everyone. No exceptions.

Jesus today talks about love. He references an important line from Deuteronomy, as well as the Leviticus passage we heard. Love God. Love your neighbor. That’s the great command, the expectation.

I’m not particularly good at invisible spiritual things, so I am not sure about how to love God with all my heart and soul and mind. Is it praying all day? Is it thanking God constantly? Is it trust and reliance? As we enter stewardship season, it would be convenient if I could tell you loving God meant you should give more money to church. But I have a hunch your giving is motivated less in loving God than your care for each other.

For that, there’s a verse near the end of the New Testament that helps me with clarity: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their [human] siblings are liars; for those who do not love a person whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1John4:20) As we’re expected to love God with our whole self, maybe we accomplish that by loving each other, loving our neighbors.

For that second part of his love expectation, Jesus quoted Leviticus. Imagine that: good stuff from Leviticus! If we’re tempted to think of neighbors as those closest to us or most like us, the Leviticus chapter has statements on expectations of giving justice to the poor, caring for the rights of women and the disabled, and especially supporting foreigners and strangers, leading to the line “you shall love the immigrant as yourself” (v34).

In this election season, there’s cause for that verse to prompt self-satisfied finger-wagging. We’re supposed to love immigrants, and Jesus

expects it of us. Some people claiming to be so holy and right are just hypocrites, lacking in love.

But if we’re ready to look down on them, then how are we doing at loving? The BYOB Bible Study was listing those we’re supposed to love: the vulnerable, Black and brown people, people who are LGBTQ+, those on the other side of the political aisle...but with that last one Doug Johnson (jokingly, I think) said, “Hold it! That’s too far!” For some of us, it is too much, too unappealing. We can feel love for the hypothetical child separated from her parents and locked in a cage, but it’s not easy to love those we blame for doing it.

In his first speech in this Gospel, though, Jesus said he expects us to love also our enemies. For that, I’m helped by Martin Luther King (making this the first time I’ve referenced Martin Luther King before Martin Luther in a Reformation sermon). Dr. King said:

I’m very happy that [Jesus] didn’t say like your enemies, because it is pretty difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental, and it is pretty difficult...to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says love them, and love is greater than like. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all [people].\*

That helps me conceive of what this expectation is, even if it’s not so simply instructive. What is love? Dr. King says it’s not liking. (I guess that’s why Jean Oliverson’s family makes the distinction in saying “love you; like you, too.”) You’re not expected to like others. It must not be affectionate lovey-dovey hugs and roses. It’s not giving in for the other always to get their way; that’s not love, that’s exploitation.

Dr. King called it “understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all people.” There’s plenty of effort expected in trying to understand, to create and foster life, not just the absence of ill will but actual good will, to redeem broken relationships. You could spend your whole existence working on that for one single person, not

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\* in *A Testament of Hope*, p47 (or 256)

to mention your enemies and immigrants and all other neighbors.

For my part, I could quickly say I agree with this loving. I'd also quickly say I don't feel very successful at it.

I love you. Absolutely. In these months, I'm trying hard. I want to understand how it's been for you. I want to help redeem your suffering and the stifling of life. I want to create new possibilities. I'm trying to care, to help, to be compassionate and positive, to reach out. I even want these words to be pure good for you. Yet I'm not doing nearly as well as I wish for what you need.

That congregational example is one. But you clearly have your own, wishing you could do more—for immigrant children, for the sick and with the spread of the virus, for Indigenous people, for the starving, for those in forest fires, for the health and future of the planet, for—for the love of Pete—your own family.

I could say don't go so hard on yourself. Some might say this is the "as you love yourself" part of it. If you want to do more, you're clearly already doing a lot and you're motivated to do right. It's good for you to recognize that. You don't need to be an expert at all the expectations. Notice your love, even in little things, the small differences, the daily stuff.

I don't want you to despair. If we take this seriously, more love is always needed. So expectations hang over us, making us feel we've failed, showing we fall short. Plus, these are days when it's hard to love. We're worn out. There's just too much. And it might leave a shorter fuse at home. It might be feeling less capable, with lower energy. It might be we're polarized with a lot at stake, so we snap to judgments. You don't need a lecture saying, c'mon!, try harder to love. It's just reality: you *are* trying and can only do so much, even if it's not enough.

At this point, I want to refocus us. This has been all about expectations of you, how you're supposed to be, what you should do, in ways you already naturally are but also for more than you could ever be.

This is Reformation Sunday, a day that looks back to a time when the church was trapping people in expectations, not only for this life, but manipulating and condemning them in life to come because of their shortfalls or simple realities. So the Reformers were striving to return us to the true center of the church, to talk first about God, to have the benefit of Jesus. They called themselves Evangelicals, which we might translate as the Good News Crew.

See, God is primarily loving and generous. God is for you. God isn't first about demanding love from you, with self-centered need for attention and devotion. Neither is God a scorekeeper, tracking efforts of love and tallying your failures to hold it against you later. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)

Earlier I shared a verse from the end of the New Testament. The verse before it is this beauty: "We love because God first loved us." (1John4:19). I believe that is not only with an ought—since we have been loved, therefore we *should* love. I believe it's also causative. God's love is what enables you to love. Dr. King said it is "the love of God working in the lives of humans." Because God so loved you, loved you so much, loved you in creation, loved your abilities and identity and character, loved you whoever you are, loved you for what you do and also through what you don't do, loved you in Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, loves you here and now, loves you to eternity. Because God loves you in the fullest extent possible, you exist only in love, unconditionally in God's love.

For closing, I was remembering my nephew who, in so very much wanting a pet, tried to assure that he'd take care of it and do the chores. Of course, when the pet arrived those guarantees inevitably fell through and his parents wound up with the responsibility, but they didn't begrudge either him or the pet. Would we expect any less of your God of love? You try to assure you will be responsible in loving your neighbors, and really want to put in the best effort and do the right thing, but when it turns out otherwise, God isn't there just to hold you to the impossible set of expectations

and rub your nose in it, but to continue loving you through what you can't or didn't do, striving still for the good of all. Would we expect anything less from God's love?