

Sermon 031217 Love
Scripture: John 13: 31-35
Sermon Title: Tough Love

The Greatest Commandment from Jesus is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might and love your neighbor as yourself.” Two weeks ago, I preached on the first part of the Greatest Commandment from Jesus. Last week, I had the obligatory first Sunday in Lent sermon on temptation. Today, I’m going back to do the second half of the Greatest Commandment. It doesn’t seem right to let the first half hang out there on its own. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor as yourself. Jesus also tells us to love our enemies.

Now here is the problem. We don’t do it. We don’t love one another as Jesus loves us. Oh sure, we love others. But they are the people that we know and enjoy. We love our spouse, our children, our family (even the ones that are hard to love), and our friends. We might have an abiding love for our God and our country, our town, and maybe even a local sports team or two. But all those are relatively easy to love. We also feel strong obligations to love them. But we know that Jesus’ call to love casts a much wider net than those we are naturally inclined to love. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves and even to love our enemies. And that spells trouble.

On the morning of June 23, 2007, I was wearing a tuxedo and nervously milling around the fellowship hall of a church in Norwell, waiting to marry the Fabulous Meg. Family and friends were arriving

and I was greeting them and listening to the obligatory wedding chatter. A couple walked in to the area. The woman I did not know. The man I instantly recognized. It was George Dunn. Actually, that is not his real name, I changed his name to protect the guilty. I could not believe that George Dunn was attending my wedding. I had worked with George at AAA. He had left AAA a few years before I did. He was the computer guy in the firm. I was opening new branches and depended upon George to handle the acquisition of, efficient installation of, and operation of the various computers in my branches.

I can say honestly that George Dunn was the worst person I ever had to deal with in my entire professional career. When I asked him to do something, I would get long lectures on why he was too busy to do it. The lecture would take longer than it would have taken to do what I asked. He would lecture on how many computer gink magazines he read to keep current with the state of the art. He talked about how smart he was and all the responsibility he had. The guy drove me nuts. I tried being nice to him. When tactics of patience and collegial friendliness proved fruitless, I started going negative to see if I could get what I needed from George that way. That worked better but not well. Going negative had the side affect of a hostile relationship between George and me.

I'm being honest with you. I did not like the person that I was when I was dealing with George Dunn. I can't imagine anyone else

could have liked me either. My darkest angels had a field day. I was mean and sarcastic and worse. So was he, by the way. It was our job to work cooperatively and we were doing anything but. It was a war. George was having problems with other people, too, and he was not getting his job done. George was, as we used to say, career adjusted out of the company. I must admit that George being fired made me happy and I did not keep that a secret.

The next time I laid eyes on George Dunn was at my wedding. When I saw Meg a few minutes later. I kissed my bride, told her how beautiful she looked and how happy I was then immediately said, “There’s a guy here named George Dunn. What is he doing here?” Meg said, “He and his wife Jen live across the street.” Folks, George Dunn became my closest neighbor. Jesus tells us to, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” God does have a sense of humor. You couldn’t script a better morality play. An ordained Christian minister moves in across the street from someone who he has considered an enemy. I wish I could move into Mr. Roger’s neighborhood and instead I got George Dunn. George MacDonald, the great Presbyterian preacher says, “A man”-and I’m sure he includes women in this-“must not choose his neighbors; he must take the neighbors God sends him.” When I say, that following Jesus is hard sometimes, I’m speaking from experience. Loving your neighbor is hard enough but Jesus ups the anti with, “Love your enemy.” George Dunn was both.

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Although close ethnically, Jews and Samaritans were adversaries, much like today's Jews and Palestinians. Jesus is teaching us not just to love the people that we like, but love the ones we don't like. Love your enemies. Love the ones that it is uncomfortable to love, Jesus teaches us. Jesus loved the ones who crucified him. What about us?

We love the phrase, "Count your blessings." I expect we all have done that plenty but if you are anything like me, you have spent considerable time counting your enemies. Which do you spend more time on, counting your enemies or your blessings?

Anybody ever had a George Dunn in your life? Anyone consider Muslims the enemy? Anyone consider people of a different political persuasion the enemy? How about rich people? How about poor people? How about the family member that you have to love despite the nasty way she talks about other family members? How about the person who is not paying attention to their driving but is happily chatting away on the cell phone or texting? How about the indifferent teenager who is slow as molasses in January so the popcorn line that you are in goes on forever while your movie is starting now. How about the person you flat out- just don't like?

Those are the people that Jesus is calling us to love. I think Jesus knows fully well how risky that is; to love our neighbors as well as our enemies. Let's do a little thought exercise. I'd like you to think of the

person that is the most obnoxious to you. Think of the person who has hurt you, or would if given the opportunity. That didn't take long, did it? Now think, that is the person that you are to love as yourself. Now I'm going to make it easier to do. If you continue to hate that person, you harm yourself. You do not put that person's soul in jeopardy; you put your own soul in jeopardy. All of the energy that it takes to hate does not hurt the object of our hatred; it hurts us. I think Jesus is trying to help each of us live lovingly and peacefully in this world, and thereby make the world a more loving and peaceful place.

How many of us have these conflicts with others using up space in our hearts and minds. How many of us have tossed and turned at night over some or many conflicts in our lives. In his first term, President George W. Bush was with his Secretary of State, Colin Powell when a reporter asked the President if he was sleeping well at night. Bush said that he "sleeps like a baby." Secretary Powell was then asked the same question. He said, "I also sleep like a baby; I wake up crying every two hours."

I should mention that the war with George Dunn is over. I don't lose any sleep over him. I don't see him anymore since we moved out of Norwell and came here. What I've settled on is the Good Samaritan story. If I see George lying in a heap on the side of the street, I'll definitely help him out. Hey, it's a start.

Uncomfortableness is the nature of our faith, in the face of the call to love our neighbor and our enemy. This is a key question, this tough love of those we do not want to love. This is a reason that we hold church every Sunday- so we can come and get help in the question of how to live more fulfilled lives. Today's question is how do we love those we do not want to love.

Nobody ever said that people left church, having encountered Jesus and his gospel of love and came away saying, "Good, I get it. Now the rest of my life I will do nothing but love people that I find hard to love." Then they go on and do exactly that. This world is way too cold, harsh and complicated for that. We may try but we get angry, wounded, resentful, alienated in this fallen world. Nobody that understands Jesus' message of love can say the practice is as easy as the understanding. We come here to hear the message of love over and again to remind ourselves of our great-unfinished business as fallen Christians in a fallen world.

Soon we shall sing, "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." But we are not there yet. We have not achieved anywhere near what is required of us. The hardest message of the gospel is still before us- to love others as Jesus loves us. This is not a principle, but an action. Love in action. That is what we are to do with our neighbors. That is what we are to do with ourselves. Remember, when you love, the greatest benefactor of your love is you.

So, what then? Very simple. Our job is to keep at it, and never give up until what is too good to be true becomes both good and true.

AMEN