
Building Community
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
June 26, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Galatians 5:1, 13-26 and Luke 9:51-62

Last week we talked about refugees. And I told you that today, we would be discussing “who is my neighbour?” And I invited each of you to reach out to me to share your own ideas on both those topics. So - do you want to hear the collective wisdom that I heard this week from all of you? Well, basically, many of you told me that I had lifted up important questions. As for answers Well, that’s another story.

Fortunately, we have been spared the hard work. Because our scriptures today provided the answers. Galatians reminded us that through love we should become slaves to one another. That, “you should love your neighbour as yourself”. And Jesus famously said, “love your enemies”.

[image: love everyone, even your enemies]

So logically then, our one simple command is “love everyone, even your enemies”. Got it? Good! Amen.

(Sit down, play on your phone. Then, realize that the congregation is expecting something more. Mutter about what more they could possibly want. Mutter-ask which word is confusing to them)

I get the feeling that you want me to keep talking. Ok, I will. But I want you to tell me why - exactly - you want me to keep talking. “Love everyone, including your enemies” is a simple sentence. Which one of those words is confusing to you? Why do you want me to say more? Really! Did I say anything complicated? Perhaps Jesus was the first person to ever utter that phrase, “did I stutter?”

[image: Jesus - did I stutter?]

Let me ask you something. Imagine that you were living in Palestine 2000 years ago. And imagine that you met Jesus - as an adult yourself - when Jesus was running around during his public ministry. Here’s the question. Do you think you would have liked Jesus? Because I am not sure that I would have.

Take our reading from Luke today. People want to join Jesus on his traveling road show and he is not really very encouraging. Jesus does not let people say goodbye to their loved ones before joining him. Jesus also says that anyone who is not 100% committed to the project is not fit to even begin. Wow! In this text Jesus is the opposite of a motivational speaker.

Jesus has other sayings that are really hard to hear. One of my favourites is from the sermon on the mount, Jesus says, “Give to anyone who asks”. Full stop. Jesus does not qualify the statement at all. In our minds we create a Jesus who said, “give to anyone who asks, as long as they are decent people who are actually looking a job and willing to work and of course will not spend any money we give them on cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs”. No such luck. Jesus said, “Give to anyone who asks”. Period. No conditions. I am not sure that I would have enjoyed hanging around with Jesus myself.

Christians like to say that we follow Jesus. But let’s be honest. Jesus’s words are tough. The comedian Stephen Colbert - who is a practicing Roman Catholic - summarized this beautifully:

[image: Stephen colbert]

“If [America] is going to be a Christian nation that does not help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we have got to acknowledge that Jesus commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just do not want to do it”.

What is going on here? Was Jesus just a pain in the butt? Or did Jesus speak the truth and that truth is a pain. Jesus said that the truth will set us free - but I do not remember him saying that we would like it.

[image: love everyone, even your enemies]

Which is why I’m asking all of us for our honest reflections on “love everyone, even your enemies”. And please, take the whole summer to reflect on this. Do we think it is the truth? Is it a goal we have? Or do we hear it only as a vague aspiration that we might attempt when it is convenient for us? What do we mean when we say “love everyone, even our enemies”?

And I want to be clear with you. I am not pretending that I have this “love

everyone, even your enemies” thing all figured out either. This very week I was faced with a real challenge.

[image: homeless neighbour]

Someone who I know here in Brantford is currently experiencing homelessness. So of course I met with them. I shared a meal with them. I even invited a few other people to join us in order to create a bit of a friendly social interaction over the meal. People living with homelessness often value the company of others about as much as they value food. I gave them some cash. I gave them my time, my ear and my heart. But what they really wanted at that precise moment was a safe place to sleep for the night. I could not help them with that. But of course, that was not technically true. I do have a couch in my home. And the cat isn't always on it. But inviting the person into my home would violate an agreement I have with Marjorie. I could have let them sleep at the church. But that would violate a number of other agreements. And all the while as I was telling this person “no”, the words of Jesus were ringing in my ears. “Give to anyone who asks”. The words of Jesus are just so challenging. Trust me. I am not pretending that this is easy.

[image: love everyone, even your enemies]

We struggle with the command “love everyone, even your enemies”. But if it makes you feel any better, the disciples struggled with it too. We just heard about that in our story in Luke. Jesus and the disciples go to a village. But the village does not receive Jesus and his disciples.

[image: tree hit by lightning]

So, the disciples offer to use bolts of lightning from the sky to roast the village and kill the inhabitants. The disciples actually thought that an appropriate response to people who did not agree with them was to kill them. So much for “love your enemies”! The text says that Jesus rebuked them. But between the words I hear Jesus let out a massive sigh. Of disappointment. I always imagine that this story is the lowest point in Jesus's ministry - for Jesus himself. This story had to be almost as painful as being crucified.

[image: Jesus crying]

I say that because the events in this story likely happened only weeks before

Jesus's crucifixion. Here we are, late in the fourth quarter in Jesus' ministry. We are almost at the point where a field goal will be decisive. And Jesus was starting to wonder if his own disciples actually understand the purpose of his ministry. Jesus had to be wondering just what kind of impatient morons were going to be in charge of his ministry when he left in a couple of weeks.

I wonder if Jesus was concerned that once he was not around to guide the ship, the ministry he had started would be on the rocks faster than anyone could say "substitutionary atonement"? I mean, even the disciples thought that "love everyone" did not apply to people who disagreed with them.

[image: love everyone, even your enemies]

The disciples reacted just like we do to the message "love everyone, even your enemies". We always think that there must be some exceptions. You know the drill. Sure, Jesus said love everyone, but Jesus never met some of the idiots that I have to put up with. Surely, "love everyone" does not include ... everyone!

But ... what ... if ... everyone ... does ... include ... everyone.

"Love your enemies" makes a great slogan. But what does it really mean? If you go online or talk to people on the street, you will find that people have many different ways to understand the phrase "love your enemies". Some of the ways that people explain "love your enemies" sound to me like elaborate excuses to not actually do it. For example, someone I heard recently was arguing that love your enemies only referred to personal interactions, and should never be applied to foreign affairs. This guy actually said "love your enemies" and "bomb Iran" at the same time. I suppose I'm just too simple-minded to understand those sorts of mental gymnastics. I actually agree with the bumper sticker that says, "When Jesus said love your enemies, I'm pretty sure he did not mean kill them."

[image: bumper sticker]

But beyond not killing people - an aspiration that apparently we do not all share anyway - what does it mean to love your enemies? One clue comes from the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5), "For if you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers

and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even reprobates do the same?" It's easy to love the people who love us. And we should do that with joy of course. But loving those who love you is its own reward. What about the people who we do not love. The unlovely. The unlovable. That's usually a different story, right?

Another clue comes from the Lord's Prayer. Depending on the version. From what I know you consider to be the "standard version" we have, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." But that's a bit too poetic to drive the point home. The Lord's Prayer we sometimes use from Central America puts it this way, "Forgive us for keeping silent in the face of injustice and for burying our dreams. Don't let us fall into the temptation of taking up the same arms as the enemy, but deliver us from the evil that disunites us."

[image: spy vs spy]

The phrase "do not take up the same arms as the enemy" means a number of things. But it includes the idea that we should not respond to hate with more hate. We need to respond to hate with love. And again, we are back to "love your enemies". It's almost like it's a theme that runs through Jesus's ministry or something.

[image: hate]

Another clue comes from our own hearts. We all know - when we bother to reflect on it - that when we choose to hate someone or something, that hatred affects the one who is hated. But it also destroys us - the ones who are doing the hating. On those occasions when we choose to dwell on hate, that hatred destroys us just as surely as it tries to destroy the other person. Perhaps "love your enemies" sounds a bit utopian, but hating your enemies is the road to destruction for everybody. Hating your enemies has been in vogue for 1000's of years, and it simply does not work.

[image: war vs peace]

As an aside. Do you want to live in peace? Are you sick of living with wars and threats of wars? I'll bet that this week we all are. Do you ever wonder why there never is a war that ends all wars. Perhaps by now it's obvious to you. But my own theory is this. Any time there is a war (and this applies whether or not we are talking about foreign affairs, or the affairs of our own hearts) we of course try to win. But the simple truth is

that when we win a war, we create a loser. And that loser resents losing. So that loser will build up enough strength to fight another war at a later date. Anytime we win a war it plants the seeds of the next war. The secret to ending war is this. We just need to decide to lose a war intentionally and to not retaliate. That would break the endless cycle of perpetual wars. So what's the real secret? Love your enemies. Our response needs to come from a place of love. Does that sound impossible? Does that sound impossible for people who live with the love of God in their hearts? Does that sound impossible for people who feel forgiven. Does that sound impossible for resurrection people? Does that sound impossible for people who have found deep spiritual healing? No. Not impossible. But for most of us, it will be a work in progress. We will be a work in progress.

[image: religious freedom]

I want to share a short clip from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, better known as AOC. An American politician and activist. She is also a Roman Catholic. It seems like Roman Catholics are being more progressive than we are these days. Last week we heard the wisdom of Oscar Romero, this week we have Stephen Colbert and AOC. Perhaps Protestants have some work to do. Anyway, here is AOC's response to how religious freedom is being invoked in the US.

[image: https://youtu.be/Upa2Rk_Y1Z0?t=11]

[image: building community]

If you are concerned about your own religious freedoms, let me make this simple. As Christians, we are free to live like Christians. In particular, we are free to go downtown today and offer to buy lunch for a homeless person. We are free to meet strangers on the street and to begin new friendships. We are free to make sandwiches and hand them out on the streets. As Christians, we are free ... to quote Jesus ... to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, to visit inmates in prison.

Do we need more freedom than that? I think not.

I want to close with one last thought. This is sort of a secret that is buried in the New Testament. And it's not so much that it is a secret, it's just more that we never talk about it. We often talk about stories where Jesus heals someone, or teaches. But we rarely

talk about where he did those things. The “secret” we never talk about is that most of the cool things that Jesus did - did not happen in the synagogue. The best stories all happened on the street.

I just remembered that the title of this reflection was “Building Community”. But I spent all my time talking about how we should love each other. But I suppose loving each other is how we build community anyway.

Have a wonder-ful summer, Amen.