

"Full Love"
Matthew 5:43-48

February 20, 2011

7th Sunday After the Epiphany

Last week, the annual holiday of love – Valentine’s Day – came and went. Cards were sent and received. Candy and flowers were given and accepted. All of this was an attempt to identify love, show love, and celebrate love. This holiday, above all others, encapsulates the modern day view of what love is.

First of all, love is chiefly an emotion or feeling. It may range anywhere from a warm fuzzy feeling (similar to “like”) all the way to a deep emotional feeling. Nevertheless, it remains simply a feeling for many people. This is shown by the fact that when many married couples break up and divorce, the reason given is: we didn’t feel the love any more. Modern love as a feeling can be very unstable because feelings change.

Secondly, this feeling or emotion motivates us to perform acts of kindness. On Valentine’s Day, this may mean simple things such as cards, flowers, and chocolates. Depending on how strong the feeling is, these acts of kindness may be greater or less.

Third, this feeling of love is limited. We feel love for those who already love us. We will perform these acts of lovingkindness for those who like us and do nice things for us in return. You don’t send a valentine card to a kid who doesn’t like you. You don’t send flowers to an ex-girl friend.

Finally, as much as we talk about love being directed toward others, it’s really all about us. We love to be loved. We show love to get love. That may seem odd and you might deny it, but think about it. When you gave out valentines as a kid, did you not expect to get one back from everyone to whom you gave one? Have you ever given a gift, supposedly out of love, and then been disappointed when you didn’t get a gift back (or even a simple “thank you”)? If the gift was given solely out of love for the other person, why that feeling of disappointment?

God has a very different definition of love. Jesus gives the standard definition of love which the people of his day were familiar with. It sounds an awful like our present day understanding of love. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” The first part of that – “you shall love your neighbor” – is Biblical. However, the second part – “hate your enemy” is not. However, hating one’s enemies had become standard operating procedure for the people of Jesus’ time as it has become for many in our time.

Love, as God sees it, is very different. First of all, love is not a feeling, but an attitude. It is not a changeable emotion, but an unchanging attitude which results in commitment.

Secondly, like our understanding of love, love, as God sees it, is more than words. Love always results in acts of kindness and mercy toward the beloved.

Thirdly (and here is a great difference), love is not limited to any group of people such as those who reciprocate love or are inherently lovable. In giving the correct understanding of Biblical love, Jesus says, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” While love for neighbor is certainly involved here, it is much more. Jesus says about love limited to friends and loved ones, “For if you 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, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” Martin Luther had a great line about those who thought they were doing something good by loving their neighbors. He said, “Do you see now how pious you are if you are friendly and kind only to your friends? You are just as pious as the thieves and the scoundrels, as the whores and the criminals, or as the devil himself” (Gibbs, footnote, p.307) Biblical love is more than what sinners and those outside the family of God do. Biblical love includes one’s enemies.

Finally, Biblical love is completely altruistic. In other words, it is completely and totally unselfish. Love is shown and kindness is done solely for the benefit of the beloved without expecting or demanding anything in return.

You may be thinking, “That’s impossible. No one can live that way or love that way.” You would be right – if you were simply talking about you and me. But God is not simply defining some sort of theoretical love which is impossible to practice. Rather, God is defining His love which He has put into practice.

God’s love is not a feeling or an emotion which can vary and change. His love is an attitude which carries a commitment with it. God’s love is not theoretical. He does simply speak about love in pious sounding Biblical phrases. His love is always demonstrated in actions.

God’s love is unconditional and unlimited. He does not merely love those who love Him back. God loves even His enemies who are enemies, not because of God’s desire or design, but because of their attitudes and actions have made themselves His enemies.

In encouraging us to love our enemies, Jesus says, “For [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” How easy it would be to tell who were unbelievers if the sun only shone on believers’ houses or the rain only fell on believers’ gardens and farms. But, no, God loves and provides good gifts which He has created for those who are His enemies as well as for us, His friends.

But what makes you think we are God’s friends? Is it because we are nicer than unbelievers or more pious than non church members? The fact of the matter is that all of us, by nature and by action, are God’s enemies. This includes those whom the world considers good and just, as well those who are pious church members.

When we come into this world, we are born into sin and governed by the flesh. The Bible says, “The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” (Rom. 8:7). In other words, we are His enemies.

When we live according to the flesh, we are living as His enemies. The Bible says, “Don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” (James 4:4)

God has shown His love for His enemies – the entire human race – by doing much more than providing rain and sunshine. He gave His only Son to die as the judgment against our sin that we might be forgiven of that sin and freed from God’s judgment. He didn’t do this because any of us were nicer, kinder, or more pious than anyone else. Jesus didn’t die for the good people, the just people, or the religious people. He died for the enemies of God.

The Bible puts it this way, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:6-8)

Here is true love, as God defines it and as God shows is. The Bible says, “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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:9-10)

St. John goes on to say, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:11) Humanly speaking, this is impossible. Yet the Scriptures say, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Rom 6:4) By the new life given to each of us in baptism, we are empowered to live a life of love.

But it is not the the warm and fuzzy love of this world for those who love us and will reciprocate. This is the love which God has for us. It is the love received in the ear through the reading and preaching of the Word of God. It is the love placed in the mouth through the Holy Supper of our Lord which the early Church referred to the feast of love. It is the love experienced in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. It is a love to be received from God and reflected to the world.

It is a love that is not a changeable feeling, but an unchanging attitude. One commentator put it this way, “Love’ in biblical parlance does not refer to an emotion, but rather to an attitude of good intention that issues forth in appropriate action for the good of the other. It has nothing necessarily to do with liking someone or with emotions.” (Gibbs, footnote, p.306)

It is a love shown, not merely in words and sentiments, but in action and in deed. It is a love that does not call for revenge on our enemies, but prays for the blessing of our enemies. It is a love that does not make us children of God but shows that we are children of God. As Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”

It is a love shown, not to make us feel better or to get something in return, but solely to benefit the other whether we receive anything in return or not. Simply speaking, it is the love of God for us; the love of God in us; and the love of God through us to others. May that love be received by you continuously in the Word, Sacrament, and fellowship of God’s people. May that word be constantly reflected by to your brothers and sisters in Christ, to your friends and family, and even (especially) to your enemies. Amen.