

## How is THAT Love?

I am so very glad that English is my first language. As a native speaker I still get tripped up with words. Apparently there are over 171,000 words, currently in use, in the English language with another 47,000 obsolete words. Why is this important? Because of the word love.

Depending on which resource you use, there are either four, six, seven, eight or twelve types of love. Yeesh! And don't even get me started about the five types of love languages. I mean...who has time for THAT?

Oops...

The reading for today covers two very large subjects, love and judgement. And guess which one I just did...

Let's try this again.

Luke's Sixth chapter is chock full of teaching. Today's reading picks up exactly where last week's reading left off. Last week was blessings and woes and this week we move into loving your enemy. CAN you love someone without liking them?

I've seen bumper stickers that read "Love your enemies, it really messes with their mind". That is not what we are talking about today.

In my fifteen years of ordained ministry I've seen many different types of love.

The brand new, lovey-dovey, hearts and flowers, always at your best, everything your beloved does is adorable, etc. How is THAT love?

The demanding parent who uses love as a reward. If you place first in the swim-meet I'll praise you. But if you lose, I'll withhold affection. How is THAT love?

A couple married nearly 60 years, unable to be together in her last hours because of ridiculous governmental regulations about funding. All Harve wants to do is hold Helen's hand so she understands, even in the depth of her dementia, that she is not alone. How is THAT love?

A group of protestors stormed the capital building in Washington DC, waving flags, hiding their faces, desecrating national monuments, in the name of protecting their freedom of speech. How is THAT love?

An unmasked person demands service, ignoring a sign that states masks are mandatory. They are exercising their personal rights and nobody is going to take that away, or challenge them for the greater good. How is THAT love?

The convoy of truckers who have snarled up traffic in Ottawa for the past twenty-two days. Their original mandate has shifted and the protest has taken on racist and xenophobic rhetoric. How is THAT love?

I like to think that I am a non-judgemental person. There are times when I know immediately if I'm about to cast judgement on someone because of their appearance

(do your parents know you left the house like that),  
or their age (when you get to be MY age),  
or their socio-economic status (with great wealth comes great responsibility).

As a slight aside, do any of you ever open your mouth and your mother falls out? Something she said to you that you SWORE you'd NEVER say and then one day you open your mouth and say it?

I wonder if that ever happened to Jesus?

Jesus says, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."  
(Luke 6.28, NRSV)

To be VERY clear here, Jesus is NOT talking about a person who is being abused staying in an abusive relationship. I have known several people, men and women, who have stayed in abusive relationships –  
because they are embarrassed,  
because they are more afraid of the unknown,  
because they believe that marriage is for life – "for better or for worse"

This is an example of language failure. Jesus using the word abuse, actually, check that, the translator is using the word abuse in the way we often read the word "sin". There are four types of sin, but I'm not getting into that today. When I use the word "sin" I mean separation from God.

If a person raises their hand to strike us, we are instructed to turn the other cheek. What this means is that we are to look beyond the person's actions, and instead, into their heart. Perhaps look them in the eye.

A person who strikes someone with the intent of bodily harm is quite different from the person who strikes someone with the intent of humiliating them or taunting them. Similar to a knight throwing down their gauntlet. Back in the middle ages, if a gentleman wished to challenge another man to a duel, either swords or pistols, he may throw down a glove to show his intent.

If the other party then picked up the gauntlet, the duel was afoot. If the gentleman picked up the glove, the duel was afoot. If the gentleman who picked up the glove and accepted the challenge was egregiously affronted, he would use said glove to slap the challenger.

Is the slap about honour or power?

Jesus further instructs us to give not only our coat, if asked for it, but also our shirt. He says, quite succinctly, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6.31, NRSV) Jesus knew that ten commandments were too difficult for us. That some of us would get caught up in the minutiae and be unable to see that which is right in front of us. And so, we are given the summary of the law, or what is colloquially known as the Golden Rule.

This is absolute, empirical, universal truth. And it is the basis of Jesus telling us to love our enemies. How is THAT love?

As an undergraduate I worshipped with an Indigenous group that met at the Thorneloe Chapel in Sudbury, Ontario. The services were in English and Anishnaabe, and I was always in the minority as a settler. I felt comfortable with this community, did not attend every week, but as often as I could.

The chapel was carved from stone, in the shape of a stylized cross. The majority of the chapel was underground, and you entered it from an angle. It was always temperature controlled, winter and summer, because it was below ground.

An elder came from Manitoulin Island one Sunday to talk about a summer pow-wow series. At the end of his presentation he told us all to attend as many as we could and to imagine as we watched the dancers, all those who stood in their moccasins the seven generations before and the seven

generations to come. That image has remained with me. And has influenced much of my ministry.

Even when I disagree with someone, I imagine what it would be like to, metaphorically, stand in their moccasins. I imagine what it would be like to see with their eyes and hear with their ears. And because of this, I have a small inkling of what it is to love my enemy.

I do not "love my enemy" in the way I love my mother. I do not "love my enemy" in the way I love my grandchildren and nephews. I do not "love my enemy" in the way I love God. To "love my enemy" is to find it inside my heart and soul, to put aside any wrongs, and to love them as a fellow human being.

Believe me, I know this is not easy. If it were, there would be a lot less hatred in the world. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, said it best, "I have decided to stick with love, hate is too great a burden to bear." How is THAT love?

There are people who hate me because of who I am, and to them, what I represent. I cannot do anything about how they feel about me. Yet I can refuse to hate them in return. I love them, as a fellow human being.

The loving your enemy thing, I have figured out. The not judging thing is much more difficult. I used to love getting together with friends and picking someone else apart. Never to their face, I mean THAT would be rude.

One day this "group of friends" started picking apart someone I cared about, someone with whom I was entering a relationship. I felt very awkward about the things that were said. What were they saying about me? I decided to only say things in that group, I would say to a person's face.

Now, don't get me wrong, there are times when I FAIL in taking the right road and not judging. And these are usually good mental health barometers for me; that I am not at my best. I have tried to stay away from the news. I find it all very overwhelming at the best of times.

Now it looks like the world is perched at the precipice of war between Russia and the Ukraine. Protestors who began peacefully made the decision to desecrate national monuments, including the tomb of the unknown soldier. That is unforgivable, and yes, I know that is a judgement. If this were a perfect world, I would ask to speak to the protestors and find out exactly WHY they are protesting and WHAT they hope to gain from it. Not to judge, but to listen.

I believe everyone has the right to protest peacefully. I have demonstrated in peaceful protests, sit ins, walk outs, etc. Sometimes we were heard and other times we were not. Thirty years ago, I held a one-person sit-in at the office of the Ontario Minister of Health, Diane Marleau. I was there every business day that she was in Sudbury. This lasted three months, then she got sick of me working in the foyer of her office, and finally found time to meet with me.

I believe in free speech. I also believe that free speech has consequences. You can find free speech defined and defended in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and in the Constitution of the United States.

Intentionally, I read blog posts and listen to podcasts of people with whom I vehemently disagree. Not for self-flagellation, rather, to try and learn from them. Sometimes I can understand why they feel the way they do, and other times I simply cannot stand in their moccasins.

And the hardest part of this, is to listen without judgement, to love without judgement. And the reason I say this is because there are times when I've tried, really tried, to listen to someone with an opposing opinion to mine. As I've tried to engage them in conversation to better understand them, often their speech turns to repetitive rhetoric and I find myself feeling defensive.

Defeated, I will end the conversation, or sometimes simply turn and leave. What is most heart-breaking in those moments is the realisation that the courtesy I'm extending is not reciprocal. That proving themselves right is far more important than listening to a differing opinion. And I believe that is why Jesus tells us to love our enemies, not simply like them.

There are people I can love as a fellow human being, yet do not like at all. I am not naive enough to believe that everyone must like me. I am not naive enough to believe that everyone does like me. And honestly, I'm okay with that.

In following the way of Jesus,  
I have learned to listen with intention to listen, not with intention to answer.  
I have learned to hear with my eyes when I see a person who is lashing out.  
I have learned not to take another's anger to heart.

Importantly and interestingly, I have learned that the fastest way to stop an argument with a person who will not listen, is to agree with them. Often, once that shock wears off, the conversation can begin. Not always, but sometimes.

I have learned to be kind first, and not assume what is in another's heart.

I have learned that I am a beloved child of God. And so is my enemy.

I have learned that I am blessed. And so is my enemy.

And today, my sisters and brothers, I want you to know that you are beloved, you are blessed, and you are a child of God. And those who seek to do you harm, are the ones you should love the most. Remember, you don't have to like them.

And THAT is love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent

Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry

Fernie Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican, Fernie, BC

Luke 6.27-38

Sermon for 20 February 2022

Epiphany 7