

“THE POWER OF LOVE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 7, 2018

Some time back a bumper sticker began appearing on local cars. It offered a catchy slogan: “Practice random acts of kindness.” Perhaps because our times have turned so unkind, that old bumper sticker now seems to be undergoing revival. Over the last month I’ve seen several cars sporting the same words all over again.

Kindness is important. As a Christian I try to practice it in my daily life. However, I wasn’t particularly fond of the bumper sticker way back when and it still rubs me just a little in the wrong way even now. As Christian men and women, our responsibility is not to practice kindness randomly but regularly and consistently. We are called to be a kind people in everything we say and do—indeed, in all our relationships, constant or fleeting. For us, kindness is not supposed to be either a whim or a caprice, but, rather, our daily work.

If we have any doubts about this, all we have to do is to turn to our morning gospel lesson from the Apostle John. (*John 15:9-17*) It’s a portion of a final sermon or entreaty offered by Jesus to his apostles and disciples before he goes to the cross for us. The sermon is all about our duty and responsibility to love.

Jesus’ words, as we hear them in the morning lesson, are almost poetic. But they pack a spiritual punch. For Jesus, love and kindness are not some airy things. Instead, they are spiritually weighty and substantial matters that anyone who calls him or herself a Christian disciple needs to take to heart and always keep in mind.

Basically, Jesus’s talk to his apostles has five simple messages, each building on what comes before. The first message is that God loves us and that Jesus does too. On the very ground of this divine love from Father and Son alike, we are, in turn, commanded to love God, Jesus, and others.

Jesus’ second message is that love brings joy. Jesus describes himself as a joyful person. And he declares that if we are truly loving people, we will be filled with a wonderful joy too.

In a third lesson, Jesus announces that love has the power to help us transcend and dissolve any barriers that separate and divide us from either God or our

fellow human beings. When we know that we are divinely loved and give ourselves over to love for others, our own self-esteem builds. There's no reason for an inferiority complex. We realize that, regardless of our so-called station in life, we are second to none in our own value and importance in God's sight. Things like race, class, even the way we look just don't matter so much anymore. More importantly still, we're entitled to stand tall right alongside Jesus and count him – God's own son – as our own "friend."

In a fourth message on love and kindness, brief as it is in scripture, Jesus let us know, when we are truly loving, God will respond to our prayers all the more generously and give us all that we unselfishly ask.

Of course, in a fifth and final lesson or entreaty to us Jesus makes clear that it is critical for us to keep on loving. As authentic disciples who understand the way of God in Christ is the way of love, we should be committed and determined to—in Jesus' own words—"bear fruit that will last."

On this score, Jesus sets before us a very high standard and ideal. "Greater love," he declares, "has no one than this: to lay one's life down for his friends." (*John 15:13*) At heart, what Jesus is saying here is that the ultimate test of our love is our willingness to sacrifice our lives for another. And Jesus, I think, means this, both figuratively and literally. Indeed, look at the personal example Jesus offers. He suffers death on Calvary's cross for us. His sacrifice represents the deepest and most complete act of love imaginable.

In this day and age, it's easy to talk about love and kindness. But it's tougher to live it as Christ's disciples should. So often our own sin nature gets in the way. Unfortunately, ever since our fall from Eden, there seems to be a lively selfish instinct in all of us, obstructing love and kindness. Fortunately, our loving God and Savior shows us the way to transcend and conquer this obstacle in ourselves. As the First Letter of John, which follows the four gospels, proclaims, everyone who is a real child of God and keeps his commandment to love will find through God's grace the strength to overcome the sin of the world that lurks within and beyond ourselves. (*1 John 5:1-6*)

In this life it's easy to make excuses for a failure to love or to rationalize why we're being so selective about whom we love. All too often, because we don't like the way some folks look or act, we deem them not worth the time of day, let

alone our affection and love. However, Jesus warns us against being judgmental and ungracious.

In an earlier, even more well-known sermon delivered from a hill or mountain side, which we remember as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus actually calls upon us to “love our enemies.” (*Matthew 5:44*) He then goes on to explain that we should be praying for “those who persecute that [we] may be sons [and daughters] of [our] father in heaven.” Jesus adds: if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” He concludes: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” (*Matthew 5:47*) In other words, it’s essential for us to keep on working on love until it sticks.

Elsewhere, very helpfully, Jesus lets us know that when it comes to those with her our wronged or wounded us we are called by God to forgive, not “seven times, but seven times seventy-seven times.” (*Matthew 18:22*) Moreover, if and when our love and forgiveness do not transform the situation at hand and someone keeps on wronging us, Jesus provides assurance that God is going to bless us all the more for our persistence in trying to love them. (*Matthew 5:11-12; also see Matthew 5:21-26*) Here, once again, Jesus’ message is very clear: as Christ’s disciples we always need to hang in there with love – not letting hate, anger, and resentment overcome or defeat our faithfulness to his commands.

Jesus dealt with hard-to-love people all the time. The secret of his patience in still loving them (if it can be called a secret at all) was revealed from the cross when he prayed: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” (*Luke 23:24*) That’s a powerful insight for dealing with difficult people that we all need to embrace!

Ironically, if those difficult folks could grasp how much they lose out emotionally and spiritually when they are hateful and spiteful, I think they would turn away from their sin, greed, and harshness forever, and embrace the joyful life that true faith and love alone make possible. I’m reminded here of a quip from the pop singer Madonna as she mused on her earlier life and career, now claiming greater wisdom and maturity for herself. “If only I realized,” she said, “that I could be classy, I wouldn’t have been so trashy.” I don’t know how “classy” Madonna ever

really became. Nevertheless, her sentiments bespeak of how sheer ignorance often drives the worst in people. As Christians we need to be careful that we don't allow other people's ignorance to bring out the worst in us too.

It's perennially good advice to hate the sin and love the sinner. But then it's up to us to look for what's to love. I take heart from our Judeo-Christian teaching that everyone is made in the image of God. (*Genesis 1:26*) That right there makes every last person on this planet worthy of respect and love right. Moreover, there's bound to be something much more personal that is redeeming about them too.

I find further encouragement from the experience of the famous journalist who over the course of his lifetime interviewed thousands of people and found only one among all of them all who was genuinely boring. Yet, as a journalist remembered, even that boring guy was interesting because he was the only one! Perhaps something similar might be said about the loveliness of people if we just look closely enough. Although a few people like Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot may be exceptions, most folks have something redeeming about them that is worthy of our notice, focus, respect, and even love.

Empathy can be a great help in fulfilling Christ's to us command to love others. When we imagine ourselves walking in someone else's shoes and begin to see the world as they see it, we come to better understand and appreciate them – even if we still don't agree with them or what they believe. And that's an important step toward loving them.

In our nation today when there is so much polarization and demonization going on, we need Christian empathy and love more than ever. Only empathy and love will make it possible to bridge the divides and restored to us a sense of joyfulness as we carry other duties and responsibilities as Christians and citizens.

In the 1960s, the singer Jackie DeShannon had a popular hit song on the subject of love. It wasn't about romantic love, like so many other melodies are. Instead, it was about more basic human love. Not unlike that bumper sticker about random acts of kindness, the Jackie DeShannon hit resurfaces every so often on the air. As she sings in her dulcet voice: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love... It's the only thing that there's just too little of..."

The kind of love the world needs now is the love that Jesus makes possible as we put our faith and trust in him and follow his commandments and example. As we go about each day, let us cherish Jesus as our friend and rededicate ourselves to his way of love for all, that we may each know and share joyful, meaningful, and blessed lives. **Amen.**