

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, October 29, 2023

“Moravian Essentials: We Respond with Love”

“Young at Heart” Message

Our sermon topics for this week and next week are the two that I'm most excited about discussing from this sermon series because they really get into the heart of what our call from Christ is.

This week, we are talking about responding to God's actions with love, and next week we will talk about our response of hope.

We are told that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind, and that we shall love our neighbor as ourselves.

It sounds easy enough. Remember to love God - check! Remember to love others - check! Except - I don't think it is as easy as it seems.

When we talk about love, we make it sound like it *should* be easy to love everyone just as they are, without judgement.

And yet, it is the age-old human problem.

It is the reminder we receive every Sunday morning, and it is the confession we make regularly: God, we have failed to love everyone.

We have failed to withhold judgement, and we have failed to love our neighbor and serve them as we would love and serve ourselves. Forgive us, God.

I would like to tell you a story. It's a fictional story that I wrote myself, so bear with me.

Once upon a time, a little boy named Charlie lived next door to a little girl named Jenny.

Jenny was older than Charlie by three whole days, and Jenny believed this made her better than Charlie.

Jenny would tease Charlie and call him a baby. She would make him feel worthless.

Almost every day, Jenny would call Charlie names, and every day, he could feel the sting of tears in his eyes.

Jenny started to go beyond name-calling. She began pushing him around, making him fall down and scrape his knees.

Charlie began avoiding Jenny as best he could.

He really didn't like Jenny at all. He might even say he hated her.

Charlie hated Jenny so much that he felt like she could disappear from the face of the earth, and he would be perfectly happy.

One day, while Charlie was outside, he saw Jenny trip on a crack in the sidewalk and fall face-first into the ground.

Charlie thought for a second that Jenny had gotten what she deserved.

But then, he saw that she was crying and holding her hand to her face.

When she moved her hands, he saw she was bleeding pretty badly.

Charlie ran inside to call for help, and then ran back outside to comfort Jenny and ask if she was OK.

It turned out Jenny had broken her nose and needed stitches.

Charlie made sure he stayed with Jenny until help came.

The incident didn't make Charlie like Jenny any better – she had bullied him enough that he might never be able to truly like her.

But, he had enough love and compassion in his heart to help Jenny when she needed it, even though she had hurt him pretty badly in the past.

Charlie and Jenny were never friends, but she was grateful for his help and she did thank him for his kindness eventually.

The End.

The Message

My hope in sharing this story is that it begs the question: what *is* love? 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love is patient; love is kind. It rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

It also tells us what love is not: love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoings.

That's helpful, but it also starts to get at something deeper.

Love is complicated. It seems like love should be simple, but anyone who is married or has children or parents know that love is anything but simple.

It's easy to understand love toward others when we like the other person.

But what about loving someone we don't particularly care for?

What about loving someone we can't stand?

How do we love someone who has hurt us?

How do we love someone who has abused us, used us, or harmed us emotionally or spiritually?

How do we love someone who has bullied us, like in our story about Charlie and Jenny?

What about people who are vastly different than us? Is it easy to withhold judgement and love the person begging for money on the street corner?

Or do we wonder how they ended up there?

Is it easy to love someone who holds a political opinion that is completely opposite of yours?

What about a person who holds a view that your rights should be diminished or taken away?

Love is not easy. Sometimes it can be hard to love God, let alone love *all* other people!

How many times have we heard someone question why God would allow bad things to happen to good people?

When horrible things happen to us, we often wonder where God was, or why God would let such a thing happen in the first place.

It can be hard even for people with strong faith to fully love God when life gets difficult and hope is lost.

We are called to love one another, and yet we struggle daily with loving and serving others.

It is always a balance between loving ourselves, caring for ourselves, and looking out for ourselves, and serving and loving others. Often we feel like we cannot do both at once.

Love is complicated and surprisingly difficult for us humans.

This is one of many reasons Jesus spent time on earth. He offers many examples of what loving and serving others looks like.

Through Christ's sacrificial love, compassion, forgiveness, and teachings, we **see** love in action, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we **know** love as a living experience now and forever.

We are called to respond in love to God's loving action through Jesus Christ.

We love because God first loved us and God continues to demonstrate for us time and time again a kind of love which seeks the best for humanity in God's all-embracing love.

Love is complicated, but love is also:

Sacrificial, selfless, compassionate, forgiving, affirming, reconciling, healing, and inclusive.

It means loving the world for what it can and should be in relationship with God.

We can demonstrate love in action and we can respond in love in several ways:

We can offer our gifts, time, and service on behalf of others.

This might mean giving money, or it might mean giving of ourselves in other ways. Sometimes, it means doing all of the above.

When you are a part of a small church like Good Shepherd, many of us offer our gifts in more than one way, demonstrating love in action and responding to God's gifts in love.

We can also put another's good before our own. Anyone who is a parent likely knows what it means to make such a sacrifice.

We do need to recognize though that there is a balance - if we are always putting the needs of others ahead of our own needs, we will eventually burn out.

Part of this demonstration of loving action is making sure we are not giving so much of ourselves that we end up with nothing left to give.

Another way we can demonstrate loving action is by letting go of past hurts.

I know that this is easier said than done, and this is another way that love is complicated.

When we are hurt, we tend to hold onto that hurt for years or maybe our entire life, depending on the hurt.

I like to use the example of my fifth grade bully.

The girl who sat next to me in my fifth grade classroom bullied me, and I didn't care for her all the way through high school graduation day.

Even now, while I don't necessarily feel like I'm holding onto that hurt anymore, I still think that if I saw her now, I would assume that she is still a bully.

For all I know, she's a perfectly lovely, kind adult human being. But my initial assumption would be that she's still a bully.

Demonstrating loving action means working to overcome those hurts and release that judgement.

Along those same lines, we can work on making peace. This may also be complicated.

If we realize or recognize that perhaps we were the bully to someone, we can demonstrate loving action by working toward reconciliation.

If we abused, or took advantage of someone, or if we are simply holding onto a grudge or a past hurt, we can work to make peace with that, even if it is only in our own heart.

One of my favorite ways that we can demonstrate love toward others is by encouraging and supporting one another.

This one can be difficult for some people because we often want to be the best at something, or we might become jealous of another person's success.

But, when we collaborate and work together toward a common goal, rather than viewing everything as a competition to be won, we can learn to encourage and build others up in ways that are in service to others.

Finally, we can work on restoring health and welcoming all as created in the image of God.

Without our own health, we cannot as easily serve others, so it is important to care for physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

As followers of Christ, we can also take to heart his example of welcoming all to the table.

This act of welcome, even to those who we struggle to like or enjoy being around, is one of loving service to others.

God knows that this becomes complex when personalities clash, and God also knows that loving people who rub us the wrong way is difficult.

I do want to be clear that I do not think God wants us to spend a lot of time with people who drain us, or people who take advantage of us, harm us, or abuse us.

Sometimes, acting in loving ways might mean setting a boundary that reduces or eliminates contact with someone, while also letting go of the hurts that person may have caused, or getting help if we need it.

We can see now why this kind of love can be so complicated, and that it's a process of constant improvement and regular reminders of Christ's examples.

Yes, we are called to love others. Christ offers us many examples of loving action.

Christ's sacrifice not only demonstrated loving compassion for us, but also redeemed us so that when we do not love perfectly, we are still forgiven, and we are given our entire lives to improve on our understanding of love, care, and service toward others.

Amen.

Let us pray:

God of mercy and of love, we come before you today acknowledging that we are challenged by the commandments you gave to love our neighbors as ourselves. Loving all people is harder than we would like to admit, so we ask for your ongoing support in learning to love beyond ourselves. We welcome Christ's example of love in action, and we pray for your guidance and support as we navigate the world of human complexity. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.