

May 18, 2025
Sermon Manuscript

John 13:31-35 (NIV)

³¹ When (Judas) was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³ “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Cultivating Love for All

This morning I want to proclaim good news revealed in our gospel passage: that the more we learn to love others - not in feeling, but in action - the more we will receive and live in the joy of Christ. So, today I want to talk about love.

What does it mean to love someone? Well, the message we receive over and over from society is a feeling: in particular, the feelings of affection and bonding with someone. From TV shows and movies to Hallmark cards and what has become of St Valentine's day, we have been taught to understand love in this way. And, when it comes to a romantic relationship, we are all familiar with - and probably ourselves have used - the phrase “falling in love” to describe an involuntary experience by which we descend into this state of romantic affection toward and bonding with someone.¹ Of course, a dark side of this is that it has become all-too-common for people to cite the dissipation of these feelings as reason enough for divorce; you'll hear explanations like “I just didn't feel anything for my spouse anymore” or “our lives grew apart.” The loss of such affection and bonding *can* be incredibly painful, but when Jesus teaches about love, He is not talking about feelings of love at all; the love Jesus talks about is an action.

In the final two verses of our gospel passage, Jesus says to His disciples, “³⁴ A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”² But, here He is not commanding them - (or) us - to *feel something* toward each other, or to determine *whether* we are loving someone based on our feelings toward them; Jesus is talking about the action of loving the other. And truly loving someone with the love of Christ means to seek or advocate for what is best for a person according to God, but (to do so) without being controlling; because this is how Christ has loved us and continues to love us. #

But, while the verse in our passage Jesus seems to be narrowly directing the disciples to love one another, we know that elsewhere Jesus' call is much wider: to love even our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven*” (Mt 5:43-45a).³ And, of course, Jesus lived out this love of enemies all the way to his death: going to the cross out of love for humankind, who had made *ourselves* His enemies.

¹ The phrase/concept of “falling in love” is believed by many to have originated with Shakespeare.

² This takes place in the aftermath of Jesus' Last Supper with His Disciples, when Jesus has just washed their feet and they are still in the upper room, but Judas has gone out to betray Jesus. And now, Jesus begins a sort of farewell speech to the disciples, which extends all the way to John chapter 17.

³ See also: Luke 6:27-28 - “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Well, I think any of us who are following Jesus and have read the Gospels *know* that Jesus calls us to enemy love - and perhaps even desire to live it out and can see the goodness in it - but how do we do it? How do we get there, where we can do this?

Well, according to Christian author Dan White, who's done considerable writing about this,⁴ In order to become capable of enemy love, we have to recognize that our primary obstacle is fear. Fear is the kryptonite to love, and this is what scripture teaches; not just Dan White.

In 1 John 4, where John writes in verse 16: "God is love. (And) whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."⁵ And White explains that "Love ultimately pulls us outward, toward others, toward the stranger, the widow, the foreigner, the poor, and most shockingly, toward our enemies."⁶ But two verses later John explains, "There is no fear in love, (rather) perfect love drives out fear" (v18). And what this reveals is that love and fear are opposed to one another. So, while the perfect love of God drives out fear, fear drives out love. As White explains, our "fear wants to flat-out crush any compassion for *anyone unlike me*—my neighbor, the stranger, and my enemies." And it blinds us from recognizing what love looks like in any given situation, from even being able to *imagine* it. Fear blinds us from seeing the image of God in others and instead causes us to view them as monsters, which gives us the impulse to either attack or avoid them, instead of love them.

But, to be fair, when it comes to our impulse to fear those different from us, those who differ from us (and make imaginary monsters out of them), we absolutely come by this honestly, and for quite a few reasons. But today I will highlight just two factors that White highlights, which contribute to our tendency to fear those who differ from us. *[[Two I won't mention are explained here⁷ and here⁸.]]*

⁴ *Love over Fear: Facing Monsters, Befriending Enemies, and Healing Our Polarized World*, Dan White Jr., Moody Publishers: 2019.

⁵ 1 John 4:16b-18 -

^{16b} *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.* ¹⁷ *This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.* ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

⁶ He continues: "This love is the Spirit of Jesus in us, around us, available to us, which is why we are invited to 'live in love.'"

⁷ There is also a physiological component to our fear problem. It can sound counter-intuitive, but fear feels good. It reminds me of a story I saw a few years back where scientists found the what draws people to carbonated drinks is actually the slight sensation of pain they cause on our tongues. But the way our brains are wired actually inclines us toward fear. Our brain stem (at the bottom) controls breathing, heart rate, digestion, excretion, and so forth. Then, behind that, in the back of our skull is the cerebellum, which "is responsible for voluntary movements such as posture, balance, coordination, and speech." But the biggest part of the brain, known as the cerebrum, has two different sections: the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. Well the amygdala is responsible for our emotions that tend to be more impulsive or reflexive like disgust, laughter, fear, excitement, sex drive, and anger; in other words, things that just happen. However, in contrast, higher brain functions that require some contemplation, "such as empathy, forgiveness, self-control, patience, hospitality, and listening (not just hearing)", these occur in the prefrontal cortex. So, as you can see, even our physiological makeup reflects that fear is a more automatic response, while empathy and forgiveness and so on – basically what scripture identifies as the fruits of the Spirit – requires that we transcend our more primal reactions. Is it any wonder that we need the Holy Spirit's help for this?

But to make matters worse, the emotion of fear actually causes the amygdala to release dopamine and serotonin, the brain's feel-good chemicals, which encourages us to indulge it more, while the prefrontal cortex does not produce the same feel-good chemical cocktail. So all of this may explain why even "though the prefrontal cortex is the largest part of our brain, it is the least utilized part by the majority of the population." Would you believe that scientists estimate "that only 10% of the population uses their prefrontal cortex on a regular basis"?

⁸ Another influence that hinders our ability to love our neighbor is the way our law culture in American society shapes us to always be trying to determine who is right and who is wrong. The English system of law that was brought to America by the original settlers was based on the idea that a person has to be aware they are doing something wrong in order to be found guilty and branded a criminal. So, from this perspective, the purpose of civil laws is to inform our conscience about what is right and wrong. Later on, Teddy Roosevelt would say that a civil society is a society that is legislated, that has laws. In other words, laws make a society civil. Well, White points out that while our law culture is certainly valuable for maintaining some order and civility in society, it has serious side effects on our ability to relate with others: "Law may keep us off each other's lawns, but it does not teach us how to love our neighbor."

Instead, the American law culture inclines us to view people primarily in terms of right and wrong. We then take this into the area of moral law, which makes it increasingly difficult to see the humanity of those we believe are sinning. And this is precisely the point St. Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 8:1. The Corinthian Christians have been abstaining from the sin of eating food dedicated to idols, but their obedience to this moral law causes them to think themselves better than the 'weak' who do not abstain. So Paul rebukes them for lacking empathy toward the weak, citing this as an example of "knowledge" of the law puffing them up, when only "love builds up".

First, our fear of those who aren't like us is rooted in our survival instinct. In the early days of human history, our fear was most commonly activated in response to threats from "a wild animal or a rival tribesman"; in other words, kill or be-killed situations. But White explains that, as the world has changed and developed to where our physical well-being is not at risk multiple times a day - at least living as citizens in a first world country - the threats we are most prone to perceive *now* come in "in the form of ideas and opinions". In other words, in today's world it is those whose morals or politics or race or religion is different from ours whom we are likely to perceive as threats to our well-being. As White says, "Fear thrives in the shadows of our opinions, our rants, our judgments, and our preferred labels" and causes us to turn those who *view the world* differently or *live* differently than we do into **monsters**. He says, "People don't have to do heinous evil things for us to see them as monsters; we just have to feel a tad better than they are..."

So who is it that you or I have made into a monster? It could be groups of people like people of another religion or denomination, people with extreme political passion in a direction that makes us uncomfortable - whether they're advocates for gun rights or transgenderism or abortion or mass deportations.⁹ Who does our social media algorithm seem to think are our enemies? Now don't get me wrong: when it comes to moral and ethical issues, moving beyond fear doesn't mean we stop believing in right and wrong (of course not!). But it *does* mean we seek to move beyond viewing people in such simplistic ways or as *all one thing*.

We can also make monsters out of particular individuals we cross paths with in our community or online, like that person who said that thing that time, or that person who posts pics on social media that seem so attention-seeking, or the one who parents their kids in that certain way, or has that irritating bumper sticker on their car. Toward whom does that feeling of disgust arise in our hearts? #

Well, this leads to a second factor that challenges our capacity to love those different from us, which is that our society teaches us we can know people without ever talking to them, that we can know people strictly by knowing information about them. And this is because Western society has come to define knowledge as being the awareness of information; knowledge has become understood primarily as an awareness of factoids, to knowing information. But White says that understanding knowledge in this way also impacts how we view other people, because it gives us the false impression that we can know people simply by knowing this or that fact about them.¹⁰ For example, we think we can know people based solely on an awareness of their political or religious or moral views. It encourages in people ridiculous beliefs about whole groups of people. And because this understanding of knowledge is so impersonal, it weakens the potential for us to feel empathy and feeds our tendency to make monsters out of others. But, in contrast to this, Jesus modeled an approach to knowing others instead as a learning process that occurs through relationship. In other words, what Jesus makes apparent is that the way we come to *truly know* people is by entering into relationship with them. #

Our sinful condition inclines all of us toward a preoccupation with always trying to determine who is right and who is wrong, toward standing in judgment of others, even though the scriptures reserve this role entirely for God. The Greek root for the word judgment is 'krino', meaning "to separate." So it feels good to do it because separating ourselves from others gives us a false sense of superiority. And because our civil law culture in America trains us to view people primarily in terms of right and wrong it only exacerbates this sinful tendency in us.

⁹ White brings the point home when he says for some right-leaning folks Jesus' would've told his parable of the Good Samaritan as "The Good Progressive" while for those who lean to the left he would have told it as "The Good Conservative".

¹⁰ Notably, this includes how we should understand what it means for us to "know Jesus". Unfortunately, Christianity in the West has become heavily influenced by this predominant factoid view of "knowledge" and thus the Church is prone to teach the distorted version of the gospel that salvation comes from thinking correctly about Jesus - that he's the Son of God and rose from the dead and so on - while the Bible teaches that salvation comes through entering into a spiritual relationship with the risen Lord.

So, if fear is our primary obstacle to loving our enemies, which are most often those who differ from us in their ideas or opinions *or ways of living*, how can we move toward being capable of loving them?

Well, White suggests it begins with us beginning to look inward and acknowledge the aversions to enemy love that rage inside of us. It is our sinful flesh that *insists* that our opinions, our preferences, our way of life must be highlighted and respected. **White believes that what keeps us from enemy love are the parts within us that have failed to receive the perfect love of Christ;** but we can't heal ourselves. And so, when we recognize those feelings & attitudes or notice them come up, a step can be just bringing them before the Lord and asking for His healing, to expand our capacity to love those who are different from us.

But then looking at outward actions we can take, White suggests *cultivating affection* for such people - by seeking to befriend them; yes, befriend them.¹¹ The greater the distance is between us and our enemies, the more our fear of them will thrive; but the converse is true as well: that as we come toward others and get to know them *relationally* (and not just what we think we know about them), then our fear of them will begin to dissipate (allowing love to bloom). And a particular way Jesus sought to connect was by breaking bread with people.¹² A classic example, Jesus said to Zaccheus, "I'm coming to your house for dinner tonight!" But the people who are some of Jesus' biggest enemies in the Gospels are the Pharisees, and yet there are multiple occasions where Jesus is eating with them.¹³

So, you may say, okay John. But let's say we seek one of these people out to chat with them at a social gathering, or even take them out to lunch or coffee: then, what do we talk about? Well, first, it may be that someone is our "enemy" because there is personal animosity between us. And if that animosity feels very close to the surface, we could gently seek to find out from them: "How have I hurt you?" And then giving them the space to respond and just listen.¹⁴

But when there *isn't* some sort of raw, personal hurt like that, the goal still shouldn't be just small talk. And so, what is there to talk about with someone who is so different from us? Well, White recommends, "Spend(ing) less time looking for compatibility and more time... looking for story, for pain, for human fragility," because he has found that pain is a universal language, because {quote} "We're all hurting, some of us just pretend we're not."

¹¹ Because the greater the distance between us and our enemies, the more fear thrives. There's a term "siloeing", which refers to our tendency to interact with mostly like-minded people.

A PEW Research study revealed: "28% of people say that 'it's important to live in a place where most people share my political views.' Similarly, 63% of those described as 'consistently conservative' say most of their close friends share their worldview, while 49% of those who are 'consistently liberal' say the same."

Barna research has exposed that "Christians are even more likely not to have friends who are different from them, especially when it comes to religious beliefs (91% mostly similar), ethnicity (88%), and political views (86%)."

White says, "We know we are siloeing when we are unable to relax and relate with people who don't share our convictions."

¹² This is what we see Jesus do: "giving space for others to be who they are, near us, without judgment." Jesus was able to be present with gluttons, drunkards, prostitutes, and tax collectors alike without having any agenda, and truly enjoying their presence.

¹³ Lk 7:36-50, Lk 11:37-54, Lk 14:1-14

¹⁴ We don't tend to like asking questions, because the very act surrenders some level of control.

White describes this approach as compassionate curiosity.¹⁵ And he suggests its practice includes

- being interested in the other¹⁶,
- being inquisitive¹⁷,
- Of course, it also requires seeking to be present, rather than preoccupied with our phone or wishing we were somewhere else.
- But, finally, most compelling to me is that we be indistinct. He explains that, “To be indistinct is to be at peace not being heard, seen, or acknowledged for the opinions we hold;”¹⁸ and this is particularly important when it comes to issues that we disagree with the person about.

So, a path forward toward learning to love our enemies is to cultivate affection through seeking to befriend them and getting to know them through compassionate curiosity.

And the best place to begin learning to do this is in the context of the Church. It is well-documented how the twelve disciples Jesus called were *very different* from each other in significant ways: four were fishermen; then there was Simon the Zealot; Matthew had been a tax collector, which meant he worked for Rome to make himself wealthy; and Philip was thought to be partially Greek, so only a half-blooded Jew. This is a picture of what the Church is meant to be: diverse in our background and perspectives, but united in our imperfect pursuit of Christ. And this unifying factor can make befriending those - who are perhaps not outright enemies, but - are different from us in some significant ways, feel even the littlest bit safer and easier. So perhaps this is part of why Jesus’ priority in today’s passage from John is calling disciples to seek to love one another. The more practiced we get at loving people who are just different from us, the more ready we might get to love people who fall in our enemy category. #

¹⁵ White asks, “Why is it not a habit to be curious about each other? Could it be we think we have each other figured out? Could it be that we want control of what’s being said?... Curiosity gives away power to another. It is an acknowledgment that we don’t know everything. This assumes humility, that we don’t already know the motivations that lurk behind other beliefs, statements, or positions within the heart. Curiosity pushes us to more, answers tell us we’re done.”

¹⁶ “Look for peculiar things in people, things unlike us that draw our curiosity.”

¹⁷ “When you find yourself about to make a statement, turn it into a question. For example, before stating, ‘This steak is really good’ instead ask, ‘What makes this steak really good?’”

Note from Fr John: this sounds like a bit of a cheesy example, but his larger point on this, especially for subjects more significant than steak, is well taken.

¹⁸ White notes that if anything requires that we feel known and loved by God, it’s surely this.

He writes, “As you are conversing with those you might be polarized with, resist the urge to be clear and combative. Yeah, you heard me right. Is it ever okay to be ambiguous? I believe it is, because Jesus was, quite often. Is it ever okay to come across unclear? I believe it is, because Jesus sometimes was. Is it ever okay to not give a Yes or No to the “is it a sin” question? Yes, because often the history of that question is so convoluted with agendas.”

White observes this characteristic (of being indistinct) in Jesus as follows... He notes that Jesus seemed to have a habit of communicating in ambiguous ways. First, Jesus was prone to answer a question with a question of his own. Second, he often spoke in parables that he would only explain to his disciples and only if they asked. In fact, White believes “If Jesus were walking the earth today, He might be called elusive, ambiguous, and hard to pin down.” So White suggests that maybe we should take a cue from Jesus and not feel obligated to always engage those who might see the world differently from us so directly all the time. He writes, “As you are conversing with those you might be polarized with, resist the urge to be clear and combative. Yeah, you heard me right. Is it ever okay to be ambiguous? I believe it is, because Jesus was, quite often. Is it ever okay to come across unclear? I believe it is, because Jesus sometimes was. Is it ever okay to not give a Yes or No to the “is it a sin” question? Yes, because often the history of that question is so convoluted with agendas.”

Just to give a personal challenge I'm anticipating with this: I'm about to go to this diocesan clergy conference over the next few days. And it might be easy to think that these gatherings are super collegial, but in a tradition like ours, there is a wide diversity of churchmanship - you've got the High Churchmen who went to this seminary and the low-Church Evangelicals who went to this other seminary, and then there's the charismatics, and so on. But there is also a wide range of what clergy believe faithfulness looks like, how they pastor, and postures they take toward different issues inside and outside of the Church. And some of my colleagues differ from me in ways that I find disturbing; and I'm sure it's mutual. So, when it is a fellow clergyperson where our differences are pretty significant, how can I seek God's help to accept where they are, to take opportunities for connection, to be indistinct, and care about their life and pain? You know, I was thinking how making efforts to do that would probably be much more life-giving *to me* than just sitting there resenting or judging them; probably be better for everybody. The good news is that the more we learn to love others - not in feeling, but in action - the more we will receive and live in the joy of Christ. #

But, before I close, there *is* a final "category" of enemy I want to highlight, sorta circling back on what we are talking about at the beginning: and that is the relationship with our spouse for those who are married. Can our spouse ever become our enemy? Maybe in certain moments or on certain issues? Maybe unresolved disagreements could escalate into much more than that? I talked at the outset about how affection and bonding are never enough to sustain a marriage, because they won't always be there, or be strong. But the vow we made compels us to take actions of love toward them even when we don't feel like it. As always, my disclaimer that love does *not mean* taking abuse; it never means that. Again, loving even our spouse means seeking what is best for them according to the ways of God's kingdom, sacrificially, but without being controlling. But, it is true that the stronger our affection is toward them, the easier it will be to love them sacrificially. And so, we would do well to do what we can to cultivate that affection in our hearts, to seek to be compassionately curious about them, along with a willingness to address hurts, to hear their experience, and to share our own experience: remember, last week, we said that sharing about the emotions and feelings we go through in our lives brings relational intimacy, restores bonding.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, thank you for loving your enemies, because that meant that in our sin you loved us, and every time we sin you still love us. God, will you show each one of us how you are calling us to take a step toward imitating loving our enemies like you do today?

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.