

"To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst."<sup>i</sup>

These words are purported to be the words of Jesus, as written in the Gospel of Luke (6.27). They are closely paralleled in the Gospel of Matthew.

Remember that there are four gospels in the New Testament of the Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which relate the life and teachings of Jesus. As they were written one to two generations after his death, the stories vary. It is not likely that all that he is purported to have said were actually his words. On this particular passage, however, there is wide agreement among New Testament scholars that they are words spoken by Jesus. In Aramaic, of course.

Love your enemies. Huh? What is meant by that? How can I love my enemies, you ask?

Well, in our English language understanding of love, which is heavily weighted toward romantic love in popular culture, this is clearly not possible. And while we have some notion that there are other types of love, this is not clearly stated. When I went to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, I found these not-so-helpful definitions of love: 1) strong affection arising out of kinship; 2) attraction based on sexual desire; 3) affection based on admiration; and 4) concern for the good of another.<sup>ii</sup> I guess that's a start.

But how much more helpful I found the ancient Greek words for love. And no, I don't read ancient Greek. There are seminaries where one must learn Greek, but mine was not one of them. Good thing! I'd still be there. I am indebted to the work of Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland.<sup>iii</sup>

The ancient Greeks had seven words that described different types of love.

First, there was *eros*, what we describe as romantic love. This is the subject of much popular music and writing, and not just contemporary. Think of William Shakespeare's sonnets, of Romeo and Juliet. The myth of our day is that if you do everything right, you can make *eros* last, that when *eros* fades, love has faded and the relationship needs to be discarded. Surprise! It doesn't.

*Eros* evolves. *Eros* becomes *pragma* in mature, lasting relationships. This is a love characterized by patience and tolerance. This is the love spoken of by the apostle Paul, so often read at weddings. You know, "Love is patient; love is kind..." (1 Cor 13.4-8)

But there are other types of love. What about kinship love? The love of a parent for their child. The Greeks described this love as *storge*.

The love of friends for each other was referred to as *philia*, a love based on "deep, personal affinity."

How about the love you see among playing children? The Greeks had a word for this, too. *Ludus*, they called it.

Then there is self love. *Philautia*. This is a tough one. One can be narcissistic, totally enamored of oneself. We've all known people like this. Or one can have a healthy love of oneself, a love that allows for keeping healthy boundaries; a love that permits us to say no: to work, to sex, to unhealthy relationships; a love that allows us to forgive ourselves. This is one of the most difficult types of love for many of us to cultivate. It is not a love that is fostered in literalist interpretations of the Bible. And yet, a healthy *philautia*, self-love, is likely a prerequisite to both *pragma*, mature relationship love, and our seventh type of love, *agape*.

*Agape*. This is the love extended to all people. In English, it might be best described as compassion. This is what Merriam-Webster described as concern for the good of another. This is the love Jesus spoke of when he told us to "love our enemies." This is the love that was central to Dr. Martin Luther King's theology and nonviolent social action.

If you remember, King "empower[ed] thousands of people to engage in militant, transformative direct action by accepting suffering without retaliation and returning good for evil," says the King Center archive website.<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps you've seen old film clips of black children being knocked down by high powered jets of water from fire hoses during the civil rights movement in the 1960's. You've likely seen the reenactment of the scene on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the movie *Selma*, where peaceful marchers were bludgeoned by police. If not, you can easily find it on YouTube.

This was the love that I studied in seminary when I took the course "Spirituality and nonviolent social transformation," in which we immersed ourselves in the writings of King, Caesar Chavez, Dorothy Day and Howard Thurman. This was the very first course I took in seminary, and was one of the most powerful and transformational.

"Let your enemies bring out the best in you, not the worst," said Jesus. Tough words to live by. He knew what he was asking. He knew how tough it was. That's why he returned to this theme again and again. He said it most often as "love your neighbor."

It was not a new theme. One finds these words in Leviticus (19.18), one of the first five books of the Old Testament, known by Jews as the Torah. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>v</sup> These are understood to be the words of God, speaking to the Jewish people. In

Leviticus, we also find these words about immigrants. "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."<sup>vi</sup> (19.34). This element is mostly missing in our national conversation about immigration.

What Jesus did was to expand the concept of neighbor, begun in Leviticus, to include everyone, including our enemies. He did this beautifully in his famous parable, The Good Samaritan. If you were here two weeks ago, you heard Merrily Stover present this wonderfully as our story for all ages. If you were not, here is the synopsis.

A man is walking along a remote stretch of road between towns. It is a road known for its robbers. Sure enough, he is beaten and robbed, left to die at the roadside. The story does not say, but implies that he is a Judean, a Jew of the dominant Jewish culture. After a time a priest approaches, the pinnacle, the highest level in the Jewish clergy. He walks on by, ignoring the man. A while later a Levite approaches. The Levite is a lesser level of clergy in the Jewish temple hierarchy. He, too, walks on by, ignoring the man. Finally, the namesake of the story, the Samaritan, approaches.

We need to understand something about Jewish social hierarchy at that time, 2000 years ago, before we go on with the story. The Samaritans were historically Israelites. Samaritans were the Israelites left behind in Judea when the Babylonians conquered them and forced Israelite religious and commercial leaders into exile in the 6th century BCE. When those Jewish leaders were finally allowed to return, about 50 years later, they found a very different form of Judaism being practiced by those who had been left behind. Without religious leaders to guide them, without a temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed, their practice of Judaism evolved differently. Those who had stayed

were quickly relegated to a very distant second class, because the returnees practiced the "true Judaism." The Samaritans were despised. One could say that Jews and Samaritans were enemies.

You know how the rest of the story goes. The Samaritan not only stops, but he cares for the injured man. He cleans and binds his wounds. And remember, he does this in a dangerous place, a place where the robbers could reappear and assault him. He puts the Judean Jew on his donkey and proceeds to the next town, where he rents a room for the man at the inn. He leaves money with the innkeeper to pay for the injured man's care, and tells the innkeeper that he will stop back in a few weeks and pay any additional money that might be owed.

"Love your neighbor as yourself." "Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst." You can bet this Samaritan story left Jesus' audience thinking. They understood the significance of the Samaritan caring for a Judean Jew. And isn't it interesting that it is the enemy that is caring for the Judean, and not the Judean caring for the enemy?

So here we are in 21st century America. In a country that has gone bonkers. Where polite discourse among disagreeing parties has largely gone missing. Where the "enemy" is typically bludgeoned and disparaged with words, if not physically. A world where ideology (both liberal and conservative) has risen to the level of idolatry, the worship of a false god, something the Hebrew Bible, aka The Old Testament, warns against again and again. But that is another sermon.

How do we do it? What does "love your enemy" look like in practice for us, here in Chico?

Here's a proposal.

You know that some of us recently carried our "Standing on the Side of Love" banner in the Chico Women's March, in solidarity with women all over this country and the world. While none of us were carrying placards, there were many marching who were. They were largely in-your-face statements about our present administration or some other political/social situation.

I found that I agreed with many, if not most of those statements. But let me ask you this: Do you think those types of statements represent Standing on the Side of Love? They may feel good, but do you think they change any minds?

A story: some of you have met my sister, Patricia Plude. She is minister of worship arts at First Mennonite Church in San Francisco. Her church has recently become socially active in a way that they have never been. They are participating, representing their church, in social action demonstrations. How do they do it? They sing. My sister told us this story of an action in front of Uber last fall, in which they blocked access to Uber headquarters. They sang as they stood with locked arms, as the police arrested them. And it had an effect. My sister recounted a conversation with an obviously moved policeman as he arrested her.

I wonder how much more effective our Standing on the Side of Love might be if we were living that message while we marched, while we demonstrated, living that message by singing with love in our hearts?

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<sup>i</sup> The Message//Remix Bible

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/love>

<sup>iii</sup> Kirk Loadman-Copeland. "Introduction to the Theme." *Touchstones*. February 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/theme/4705> accessed 02/01/2018

<sup>v</sup> NSRV

<sup>vi</sup> NSRV