



First Congregational United Church of Christ

608 West Fourth Street, Waterloo, Iowa 50702

www.firstcongucc.org Office: (319) 234-8927

[@FirstCongregationalUCCWaterlooIowa/](https://www.instagram.com/FirstCongregationalUCCWaterlooIowa/)

Seventh Sunday of Epiphany

February 20, 2022

We are delighted that you joined us today! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!

POINTS TO PONDER

^{6.27}“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

²⁸“bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

— Luke 6.27-28

“In this section of Jesus’ sermon, Jesus follows the social conditions of distributive justice he seeks for all humanity articulated just previously in the Beatitudes with the spirit of personal morality that will be required by every person to make that social condition a reality. That spirit is unconditional and supererogatory love for everyone – a love that nurtures and sustains people in moral development and spiritual progression, and that can also rehabilitate and restore them to right relationship when they have faltered from the way.

Such a love does not make sense under the systems of empire where people look out for themselves and their own, and where loving enemies is the exact opposite of what you would want to do. And this speaks to the radicality of Jesus’ vision. To love even one’s enemies requires a whole different worldview and purpose for

living. No longer can one seek to serve those closest to oneself through love of family, friends, and country, but one must now love everyone, without exception, with all of one's being.

And this makes perfect sense given that Jesus wants an egalitarian society where none is treated differently than others. For such equality of care and treatment of others to have any chance of coming to fruition, every person must be on board to love others as they love themselves. The faltering of any one person from this highest of ethical principles and epitome of spiritual understanding would bring the whole system crashing down.

If we don't love our enemies, then there is no way that we will treat them equitably compared to those who are family, friends, and people of the same religious or national heritage. Only by ridding ourselves of these humanly created divisions of prejudice and partiality can we come to love everyone, individually and collectively, as we love that which is most important to us.

Everyone has to become 'most important' to us, in Jesus' eyes. Anything less is of human ethics, not divine ethics. We are to love others, as he will end this section, as God loves us. That is the only way for the vision he has in the Beatitudes to culminate in human society. We all need to take this approach – for that is the only way our greatest dreams of peace and justice will ever have a chance of coming to fruition.

While it sounds self-defeating and self-effacing to love enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us, it is the only way that these who wish us harm will be able to be transformed into beings of love. Our love must overcome their hatred and evil. Returning their hatred and evil will only perpetuate the hatred and evil, making us like them. Instead, we are to break their cycle of hatred and evil by loving them; thus having them become like us.

Now while I suspect that Jesus would not have us to continue to put up with those who continue to seek to do us harm (remember that he kicked the dust off of his feet, and escaped the anger of crowds that were ready to kill him), we do need to hold fast to seeing them as people who eventually can change for the better. We need not remain in an abusive situation to prove our love; for that would not be loving ourselves. But we should never give up completely on people even though we may have to leave them, the situation, or even have them distanced from us and others in order that they can be rehabilitated.

The object is to treat others in such a way that they can be restored to relationship with us and the wider community. We are not to ostracize, imprison, or punish others as that indicates we no longer love them as we love ourselves. Would we want these things to happen to us for mistakes that we make? Of course not. We'd want the opportunity to repent and redeem ourselves by learning how to make restitution and be accountable for our actions so that we can regain respect from others. That can't happen when they give up on us.

For the same reason, we can't give up on others – even if we may need to remove ourselves or them from the situation for the safety of all. Instead of seeking retaliation, revenge, retribution, and punishment on those who have injured us, we are instead to seek accountability, encouragement, nurturance, and reconciliation for them. Compassion for their lives, not control over their lives, is to be our modus operandi.

We do not know what they have gone through that led them to behave badly towards us or others. Maybe they were not taught how to love unconditionally. Maybe they were, but were influenced by other forces that led them down a different path. But for us to give up on them is to repeat their behavior, as their harm to us is the result of them having given up on us. It doesn't matter whether or not we did anything wrong or not. What matters is that we do things right, whether or not they do things right or wrong. We are to be loving examples to one another if the world is to follow the lead of love.

Until we can all love one another, we will simply perpetuate the hatred, the curses, the abuse, and the polarization of human society. By loving, doing good, blessing, and praying for the worst offenders, we show them what unconditional love looks like in action. We grant them the second chance in life to learn how to see the beauty and goodness of a life of love, and how it offers blessings to oneself as well as others.

Our love of them is not to promote their bad behavior, be complicit with their wrong-doing, or enable their nastiness. No, we love them because we believe in higher ideals, like the ones listed in the Beatitudes. We yearn and work for a better world, and that will require us to be on our best behavior even when others aren't.

We are never to wish ill for others; but only the best. But we recognize that the best may mean they need to be held accountable and given a chance to reform their behavior by being separated from normal social situations until they can reenter society without being a threat to it. Rehabilitative and restorative justice is what Jesus is advocating here. It is how we create a better world.”

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2021*

“²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;
and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you;
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”
— *Luke 6.29-30*

“Jesus gives some specific examples of what the love he is talking about looks like in daily behavior. For instance, instead of striking back at those who strike at us, we instead appeal to their conscience. In Jesus’ time, if one slaps you with the palm of the hand it is their retaliation for some offense they took, justified or not. If you believe they struck you unjustly, the human response is to slap them right back. Jesus however would have us employ a different strategy: turning the other cheek. This is not a volunteering to be hit again, but a signal that you believe that their slap was unjust, and that by turning your cheek, they would have to shame themselves by hitting you with the back of their hand rather than the front: a cultural taboo in that day. The turn of the cheek makes them recognize that hitting you again would defame them, and has them reconsider whether their first slap was itself justified. Thus, it has one’s adversary rethink their own behavior – a tactic Jesus employs frequently in responding to his attackers.

A second example is if someone takes your outer garment, offer them the inner one as well. In that society, there was an inner garment that one wore next to the skin and an outer one to protect from the elements. As in the first example, by offering your inner garment to someone who took your outer garment, you appeal to their conscience. You essentially shame them by offering the second one, which would leave you nude. To have the audacity to take your outer garment, even if they need it, is a violation of one’s personhood. But in offering them the inner as well, you affirm the dignity of your personhood is greater than the things you own or wear. If they really need it that badly, then give them the whole set of clothing. That is what a generous person does. It is also what someone who sees a world in which there are no possessions, just things we use for our benefit but are not really ours to keep, will do. If someone is lacking in something that you have, give it to them. Their taking it is on their conscience, not yours.

Obviously, the exception would be for someone who has no conscience, and who has their own set of clothes and takes yours either out of greed or to sell for their own benefit. Jesus is not likely considering this possibility, much more imaginable in our world where many have far more than enough and still take from those with less, than in his where the majority have far less than enough and everyone is struggling to get by.

In the last two examples Jesus gives, he makes clear that he doesn’t differentiate our willingness to give to others based on whether they ask us for something or whether they take something from us. That applies to their motives and moral conduct, but not ours. Ours is to be giving, no matter what. In our generosity, we are telling them that their personhood matters as much to us as our own. We show that we love them – no matter their intentions or motives. This, again, appeals to their conscience, and liberates our own.

Jesus makes no distinction in giving to others who ‘deserve’ it, and those who we may think don’t. For under his vision of reality, we all deserve to have enough; and if someone tells you they don’t have enough, or even acts as though they don’t, we are to graciously and joyfully give to them in hopes that if they really need it, then they will have enough; and if they don’t need it, then they will develop a conscience in seeing how they left us with less than they have.

Again, this is the practice of unconditional love for others – not taking into consideration their motives, but only our own. We all have to answer to our own conduct; and it is not up to us to judge the conduct of others, given we don’t often know their circumstances, but only our own. If we are truly giving and generous, we will live up

to the ethic of unconditional and magnanimous love. Moreover, if they aren't, then our example may help them to see the light.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2021*

“³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.”— *Luke 6.31*

“All of his four prior examples are reducible to one universalizable ethical principle: the Golden Rule. By doing to others as you would have them do to you, you don't question their intentions or motives, just as you don't like them to question yours.

Again, we are to control only our own behavior, not that of others (unless theirs is perpetually injurious to oneself or others). How many times have we felt judged when people assumed the worst about us, and not the best...when they looked only at the action itself, and did not know the context in which the action was made?

By treating others as we want to be treated, we give them the benefit of the doubt – until they prove beyond a doubt that they are either pure or impure in their motives. We don't assume their behavior is done for the same rationale that others we know who are not trustworthy would act. By assuming the best, not the worst, we entice and encourage them to act for noble reasons, not ignoble ones. Our implicit trust serves as a motivator for them to live by the highest standards so that even if they originally did not act with integrity, our trust of them will penetrate their consciousness to awake their conscience so that they will want to do so henceforth.

Moreover, the Golden Rule is blessed not only in inspiring people to live by their best values, but also reflects how life is to be lived in an egalitarian society where we are all equals in worth. If we are all equals in worth, then it is only logical that we should also treat others that way. This is what selfless, enlightened, and ethical people do. The Golden Rule is not simply a principle for personal moral conduct, but a systemic value system for a society in which we are all loved by others as we love ourselves, and how we love others as they love themselves. We no longer think selfishly, but for the welfare of each and all. Doesn't that sound like a much better society than what we humans have constructed throughout our history? Jesus, the Messiah, is to bring about the Messianic Age by getting us to live by these loving behaviors, attitudes, and practices – interpersonally, and societally.” — *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2021*

“³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?

For even sinners love those who love them.

³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?

For even sinners do the same.

³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.” — *Luke 6.32-34*

“Here Jesus adds a critique of the typical way humans think. Too often, people think they qualify as loving if they love those who love them – e.g., family and friends. Jesus claims that even the worst of people, morally speaking, do this; and so our pride in doing what even the worst among us do is really nothing about which to praise ourselves.

The same is true of doing good to others, whether you love them or not. Even the most corrupt people will do good actions to those in whom they are in cahoots. It is not a big deal to think we are good people for doing good acts for which we will be rewarded in receiving some good from them. Nepotism, favoritism, and partiality towards those who can repay us in kind is not real goodness; it is a façade for corruption.

Likewise, if we think that lending people money makes us generous, we are sorely mistaken. Giving them the money would be generous. Giving it and expecting it to be returned may be nice, but is not generous. Again, even criminals engage in such practices where they are assured that whatever they give will be returned to them in some way.

People that only love in order to be loved in return are not loving people; they are self-centered people. People that only do good to receive something good in return are not ethical people; they are at best prudent people. And those who offer to loan people money are in no way representatives of generosity, for generous people don't expect to get back what they give.

Jesus proclaims the lie about many people's self-deception about their own thinking of themselves as loving, good, or generous when they only act in these ways to receive the same in kind. Life is not to be so transactional, where I give you something if you give me something in return. That is the way of empires, not the way of God.

The way of God is magnanimous – giving freely, joyfully, and unreservedly because of the persons we want to be, and not because we expect any other compensation for being good except being good itself. This, too, is the nature of a world that is egalitarian in nature. It is not transactional. It is transformative. We are spiritually changed to think of the welfare of all, not simply our own welfare and that of our closest loved ones.

In essence, Jesus is telling us that not only our actions need to change, but our hearts (intentions and motives) and our souls (the purity of our purpose for the sake of the good itself). Loving others is not engaging in some occasional actions, but an unremitting worldview, lifestyle, moral framework, and spirituality of being. We do good because of who we are; not what we will receive. We are generous out of the joy of giving; not because we expect reciprocity. We are loving because love is the virtue we most want to inculcate in our character; not because we may get love returned to us.

For Jesus, it is not about our beliefs, not about our principles, and not even about our actions. It is about living by love with our entire being; not for our sakes, but for the sake of love itself. This is what creates the kingdom of God in this world; a vision of shalom (peace with justice) interlaced with the spirit of love – the virtue that epitomizes God's own character and unconditional care for us all." – *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2021*

“³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” – *Luke 6.35a-d*

“Jesus repeats for us to love our enemies, fully recognizing that most people were likely confused by his saying it the first time. It is not how the world currently works. Jesus knows this. And this is precisely why he wants his disciples to help him change the world. The world will never change until we change so as to change it. We can't imagine the world will be a better place if we ourselves simply exchange places with those in authority.

Jesus well knows that systems don't change just because you get a new person in a position of power. If the system isn't changed, the next person will simply accommodate themselves to the old system that was unjust and intolerable. People change, but not the society itself. What he knew was needed was a total restructuring of society; starting with the value system itself...with peoples purposes...with society's ideals...with the stated goals to which we are to aspire...with the worldview we uphold...and with the attitudes and spirit we are to live by in relationship with one another.

If we can't love our enemies, but only those who love us, then nothing will ever change for the better – maybe for us individually, but not for society as a whole. Jesus did not come to 'save' individuals from their personal sins. Jesus came to change the world from systemic sins that infiltrated people's private and public lives. He sees the bigger picture, not so much our little moral quandaries we face from week to week. He wants a world where enemies will be loved such that they will no longer remain enemies. He wants a world where good people do good for its own benefit, not for some ulterior motive. He wants a world where people don't lend to others expecting what they lent to be returned to them, but where we give to one another whenever see another in need.

This is the loving world he envisioned: where the very idea of having an enemy receives a consternated look as now is given when he tells us to love our enemies.” – *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15/2021*

“Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” – *Luke 6.35e-g*

“This partial verse honestly doesn’t resonate with everything else Jesus has been trying to teach us. He has just stated in the earlier part of this verse that we are not to expect anything in return, and yet here it speaks of our great reward.

I suspect this was added by Luke to help convince a populace that thinks Jesus’ own vision is too radical to follow. Interpreters often water down what they think will be unacceptable to people. Radical thinkers make clear their meaning, but then are reinterpreted so as to make their meanings more palatable to a less convicted audience.

It is unfortunate if this is the case here, for Jesus has so emphasized the spirit of his ethics going beyond what ‘normal’ people will accept that trying to make it more acceptable for ‘normal’ people unravels his actual meaning. This is how the dreams of visionaries don’t come true when their followers participate in the process of trying to gain converts rather than transform souls.

If we seek for a reward, earthly or heavenly, our motive is already a perversion of Jesus’ own agenda. We are to love for its own sake, do good for its own sake, be generous for its own sake.

If God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked, the implication is that a grateful and good person will receive a greater reward – which, of course, refutes Jesus’ vision of us all being treated equally. Jesus knows we don’t have to convince truly good people to be good. They will be good, even without a reward; indeed, even if they are punished for being good – as he himself was. This introduction of a reward into Jesus’ way of thinking serves to undermine his views, and leads us back to the way of empire.” – *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15-16/2021*

“³⁶Be merciful, just as your Heavenly Parent is merciful.” – *Luke 6.36*

“Now this sounds like Jesus – asking us to do the unthinkable in being merciful even as God is merciful. Mercy, or compassion, as this could be translated, is a virtue – a character trait we develop over years of perpetual practice.

Virtues can be had by all – humans and gods. All it takes is commitment and habitual practice of them. This is why we can be as merciful as God is merciful. We have the potential to cultivate mercy/compassion into our own character. It just takes consistent hard work over decades to achieve, much like a concert pianist gets to where she no longer needs the music in front of her in order to play a well-known piece. She doesn’t have to think about it, as it has become instinctual to her.

Contrast this with human ethics where we focus on specific actions or allegiance to generic principles to determine the relative goodness of something. The ‘bigger’ the action, and the more ‘extremely’ the principle is obeyed, the better is one’s supposed goodness. Therefore, grandiose deeds are judged morally superior to deeds that come from the same spirit but are more demure.

But this is not how Jesus thinks, for he is a virtue ethicist. He sees the purity of motive as equal in moral worth despite the size of the deed. Think of how Jesus told us that the mite that the poor widow gave to the Temple treasury contrasted to the large offering the rich man gave. Most people would claim the rich man did the better deed because it was a greater sum. But not Jesus. Jesus claims her deed, though the amount she gave was much smaller, was actually greater than the rich man’s – astounding all who thought giving more meant being a better person.

Jesus sees the circumstances of each person. He judged them not for what they gave, but the context in which they gave and how much that was given all that they had to give. The widow gave everything she owned with that meager offering, whereas the rich person did not even feel the effects of his giving because he had so much more in which he could have given. Her generosity was greater. Her goodness was better. Her love was stronger. For she gave all she had, and not just a small portion of what she had.

Being merciful and compassionate as God is means to give from one’s whole being and assets. Again, this is what people with an egalitarian vision and lifestyle will do. Giving our whole selves to the cause of making the world just, peaceful, and loving is what Jesus asks of us. Are we willing to answer that call?”

– *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/16/2021*

CALLED TOGETHER AS SPIRITUAL FAMILY

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lynette Doepke

Affirming God's Presence in Us All

Welcoming the Light of Love in Our Midst

Lynette Doepke

We prepare ourselves for communing with the sacred as love's light is brought into our awareness. The light of love burns within and among each of us, and we carry that light into our sanctuary; visually reminding us of the image of the divine that lives in our hearts, minds, and souls – and that we nourish through our faith-filled fellowship.

*Centering Our Souls

"The Spirit of Love" Inspired by Luke 6.27-36

Lynette Doepke

O God of Love, who created us to love as you love:

Help us to affirm our identity as your children – not only as those whom you love unconditionally, but upon whom you call us to love others unconditionally.

When we hear you tell us to love our enemies, we wonder if you mean it. We wonder if we are capable. We wonder if it makes sense.

In asking us to love, you also ask us to trust in love itself – to have faith that love is how we should live our lives, no matter how difficult or impractical it may seem.

We believe that you do good to those who hate you and you bless those who curse you; but somehow we find it nonsensical when you ask us to go and do likewise.

When abused, we too often try to retaliate, not rehabilitate...respond in kind, not be kind.

Teach us how to not take revenge, but encourage accountability...how to not seek to punish, but to prosper moral development...how not to cause suffering, but deliver restoration.

Transform our spirits to accord with your Spirit – teaching us how to love unconditionally and inclusively.

Inspire us to be givers, not takers...persons of generosity, not animosity.

Grant us the vision to see one another, all people and all creation, as our earthly siblings whom we are to keep in our care and promote their best welfare.

Let us love such that we do not demand love in return, to do good when we are not recipients of the goodness of others, and give without expecting to be rewarded with a gift in return.

For this is your way of mercy and compassion. May we, too, make it our way. Blessings may we be, now and forever.

WE LISTEN FOR THE SACRED IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIVES

*Hymn of Mercy's Expansiveness

"There is a Wideness in God's Mercy"

#23

A Time for All God's Children

Abbie Chronister

Prayers

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns, and Acts of Compassion or Kindness

Silent Meditation: The Prayers of the People

Pastoral Prayer

Unison Prayer "Prayer from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer"

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven: The hallowing of your name echo through the universe! The way of

your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth. With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. May it be so.

Scripture Lessons

Luke 6.27-36

Lynette Doepke

^{6.27}“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸“bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰“Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹“Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³“If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴“If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶“Be merciful, just as your Heavenly Parent is merciful.

Message

“The Ethics and Spirituality Required in an Egalitarian World”

*Hymn for Christ’s Vision

“Called as Partners in Christ’s Service”

#495

WE DEDICATE OURSELVES TO GOD’S SERVICE THROUGH FAITHFULNESS

Giving of Our Tithes and Offerings

We invite you to place your offering in the containers as you leave, or you may give online or by mail. Thank you!

“Generosity arises from gratitude like heat arises from fire. Like fire, gratitude is lovely to see; but when it warms others with generosity, that is when it becomes a true blessing.”

Special Music

*Unison Prayer of Dedication

Lynette Doepke

We are called to be a generous people, always building up the Body of Christ. Let us not forget our calling, but to humbly, patiently, and gently live it day by day. Let us help bear with love the burdens of the weak, the poor, and the oppressed – coming to their aid in word, in action, and by sharing what we have with them. Let us all make every effort to build unity between ourselves and our brothers and sisters throughout the world, letting your Spirit lead and strengthen us so that we may create the bond of peace with justice that makes us all one. Let these gifts we offer today aid this calling we have from you, and so also aid those most in need. May it be so.

*Encouragement for the Journey

Be the person by whom blesses others by your actions.

May the poor find the kin-dom of heaven by your generosity.

May the hungry be filled and sated by your hospitality.

May those who weep discover in you one who will cry with them until they can laugh.

And may those hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed by others in this world
be lifted up by your compassion and loving-kindness.

Be the cause for the rejoicing of others.

We serve God and our world when we are a fountain of blessings.

May the blessings you give overflow.

Postlude

Get In Touch with Us!

Questions?

Call 319-234-8927 or email us at
fcuccoffice@gmail.com

(Messages will be checked periodically)

Pastor Bret Myers: revbmyers@yahoo.com
Youth Director Abbie: abbie.youthdirector@gmail.com
Music Director Luke: firstconguccmusic@gmail.com
Organist Hudson: HUDSON.LOURENCO7@gmail.com
Office Manager Michelle: fcuccoffice@gmail.com
Custodian Kyle: fcuccbuilding@gmail.com

*Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor.
You may email him at revbmyers@yahoo.com, or call/text his cell at 608-370-9472.
Video talking is also available via Skype or Zoom.*



**Ash Wednesday service will be at
7 p.m. on March 2, 2022.
Stay tuned for more information as the pandemic
hopefully decreases soon.**

Nourishment for the Journey

Scripture Lesson Luke 6.27-36

6.27“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36Be merciful, just as your Heavenly Parent is merciful.

Having just given the Beatitudes pronouncing the new world he envisions for all creation, an egalitarian world where all are treated equitably such that people are not differentiated by the way they are provided and cared for by society, Jesus proceeds to name the ethic and spirituality which will be required by individuals to make this societal vision a reality.

It is the ethic of magnanimous and unconditional love – for all, and to be done continuously. Yes, “all” – including one’s enemies. Yes, “continuously,” as in every moment of our lives. Jesus recognizes that there will never be genuine justice and prolific peace without people constantly caring for others as much as they care for themselves. The same love we have for ourselves and our closest loved ones needs to be the love we have for all others. If we can do it for babies, which good parents prove we can daily, we can do it for children, youth, adults, and seniors – no matter who they are, how they are related to us, from what country they come, or how their

ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religious faith, dis/abilities, criminal record, or their worldviews are similar or different from our own.

What Jesus is asking is not an ad hoc way of continuing to live, perceive, and act in the way we always have and simply add doing more acts of love towards others. It is not simply stepping up the quantity of our love and goodness in the world from one action of compassion or kindness per week to once or twice a day. He is rather advocating for a complete transformation of our characters. This will change not only how we think about things and the actions we perform routinely, but will actually change our very perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and lifestyle every second of every day -- forevermore. This is what it means for God's Spirit to live within us. It changes everything – and not just for moments at a time, but continually and for the rest of our lives.

His meaning is clear by the last verse of this passage where he tells us to be merciful just as God is merciful. We consider God to be steadfast in love and compassion for all creation – not just in certain events, but steadfastly, all of the time, and without fail. This is what Jesus is asking of us.

Of all of Jesus' sayings in the Bible, this may be the one most ignored passages. Why? Because we don't want to face how serious he is about asking for the 'all of us' in our response to God. Instead, we pretend to be pious by saying how we could never be as merciful or compassionate as God. We intellectualize this aversion to giving our all by saying that we don't even have the capacity as humans to achieve such ethical heights and spiritual peaks. We create a theology that tells us only God can be this loving and this good. But is it not a ruse to hide from others, and mostly ourselves, that we are called to a much higher level of responsibility and accountability in loving others?

We minimize the radicality of Jesus' call to us to be disciples of love, who love with our whole being, always and towards all, by convincing ourselves that we just aren't able to do this as fallible human beings. But Jesus' very specific words fly in the face of our minimizations of his call to us to give our all. We convince ourselves we can't be like God in being compassionate even though Jesus, here and other places, tells us that we can. We are not pious in pretending we don't have the capabilities of being as ethical as Jesus tells us to be; rather we are cowards to not even try to attempt this, knowing how much we will lose of what we know of our current selves if we do. If we give 'our all,' that means nothing, or little, is left of our former selves. How scary is that? Is this not why he was always telling his disciples to not be afraid – to not fear giving one's all for living by God's ways even though it means we have to give up most of what we know of ourselves in the process?

We convince ourselves that we can't love our enemies because the prospect of doing so is frightening to us. What if they take advantage of us? What if we lose our jobs, income, family, and even our lives by loving others totally when they don't love us like that in return? And how can it even be fair if we love others unconditionally and they don't reciprocate that love? Doesn't that just make us victims? Does it not mean that we are enabling their bad behavior? Do we not perpetuate evil by not destroying it rather than simply trying to influence it to see the light of love? Will evil ever be convinced that love and goodness are to be preferred? Are we not weakening ourselves by only responding in love? Is it not a losing battle to love unconditionally when others are not playing by the same rules?

Ever asked these questions? They all make perfect sense – from a human point of view that is enmeshed in a world which has never acted the way Jesus has asked us to act. But what if we took Jesus up on his advice to love others, all others, anyway – all the time, and without fail?

In another passage, Jesus warns us not to save our bodies and lose our souls. He is well aware that he is likely to be killed for following love in life fully and without fail. He is also aware, and tells his disciples specifically, that they, too, are likely to suffer and die for the cause of following the way of God's love in their lives. The world, he knows, is indeed cruel. We have every reason to be scared; and yet he tells us to not be afraid even though we have these natural fears. People will take advantage of us. We will, as his disciples were required to do, end up

losing our jobs, income, homes, family, and our lives in giving ourselves wholly to God's ways. Granted, it is not fair; but neither is the world of empire in which we are living. But which is more important: spiritual and moral integrity in loving as Christ loved, or getting along with and being complicit with an unloving world?

We have become more enamored by results and consequences in the human world than we have by the state and health of our souls in the spiritual realm. Which is more meaningful, more purpose-giving, and more fulfilling? Jesus tells us clearly, but we keep arguing the point and justifying our noncompliance with God's will.

We claim that it is not just for us to be ethically living by a higher standard while others are living by a lower standard. So what? Are we to base our spiritual well-being on how they behave, or on what God calls us to be in our own lives? It is not about fairness, and it is not about others giving back to us the love we give them. But rather it is about the love we give seed to within our own hearts and souls, that we plant in the soil of trust, quench with the water compassion, douse with the sunlight of hope, and perpetually weed for the rest of our lives.

We don't know how things will turn out. We don't have control over the results and consequences; and that is not ours to determine. God gives us the power over our own souls, but nothing else. We are responsible and accountable only for how our own souls turn out. And that is the most important and significant thing God can give us to power to determine.

Yet, we balk at the authenticity that will require of us. We'd rather have it both ways rather than having to choose either/or. Jesus made it clear that we can't serve God and mammon, but mammon, in all of its multifarious forms, is still intriguing to us. We want to say we serve God while acting in accordance with mammon. That is not how it works. That is not how God has designed it to be. But we still need to have faith in that which is most important, meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling in life: growing love in ourselves and freely giving it to others, all others. That is who we are called to be. That is how we let the image of God live in us; for that is how God is with us. That is who God is, and created us to be.

Even when we make ourselves the enemies of God; God still loves us. When we let hate into our lives, God still loves us. When we curse others, life, or our circumstances, God still cares. When we abuse others, or allow them to be abused by others, out of our fears of what may happen to us if we don't take control or if we try to intervene, God still has compassion for us. When we strike others with blows of criticalness before they are able to, we fear, strike us with the same, God still shows us mercy. When we refuse to give to others, God still gives to us.

We proclaim God's unending and unconditional love for us, do we not? But we are unwilling to offer this same love, the love God created us all with, to others. Instead we try to credit ourselves with loving those who love us, with doing good to those who do good to us, and with lending to those who will repay us. But we don't follow the example of the one who we insistently claim gives freely, joyfully, and abundantly; while expecting nothing in return.

And this is the hypocrisy Jesus pointed out in those who thought themselves as faithful in his own day. They made all kinds of justifications and excuses for not loving fully, creating theologies and practical reasons for why extravagant love was not prudent for them to do. But God doesn't call us to prudence. God calls us to spiritual enlightenment, ethical exemplariness, and moral magnanimity. God calls us to inculcate the virtue of love in our own hearts, minds, spirits, and souls so that we are filled with love; and nothing else.

We can love like this only when we put no restrictions on our love for others – when we love to love simply because it is loving to do so, and not for any other motive. We love like this when we see the giving of our love as its own blessing, and come not to expect anything else in return from those we love. This is how God loves. It is how we are to love. The question is not as the old hymn goes, 'Are Ye Able?' We are. It is how God made us. The question is: Are we willing?

– Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/15-16/2022