

February 20, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Live a Life of Love!

Knowing what true love really is  
 Knowing where true love comes from  
 Knowing how true love shows itself

“I’d like to throw the switch myself.” A reporter asked a man what he thought about the guy who brutally murdered his wife and daughter. The man’s desire to throw the switch in the execution chamber was predictable, even understandable, given the magnitude of his loss. Revenge is a natural reaction. That’s why people often say, “I don’t get mad; I get even.” The news is filled with examples of people trying to get even with those who – either actually or allegedly – hurt them. Road rage, domestic fights, shootings in the streets, endless lawsuits and the like are a sad statement about the sin in our society. Today’s climate makes it easy to harbor feelings of resentment toward others or toward a specific group of people. That, however, is not the response which Jesus wants us to have. This morning, we hear the Apostle Paul encourage us to live a life of love: knowing what true love really is; knowing where true love comes from; knowing how true love shows itself.

#### Knowing what true love really is

The English language can leave us confused about what true love really is. We use the word “love” in so many ways. “I love my wife, love my children, love my church, love my country, love my favorite sports team, love strawberry shortcake, etc.” But all of those “loves” have different meanings. In the Old Testament, God defined what he meant by true love (Leviticus 19:18), “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” That can be hard at times, so the Jews at the time of Jesus defined “neighbor” as anyone who does nice things for you. That’s cheating. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that even unbelievers love those who love them (Luke 6:32). Being friendly only to your friends is not the true love that the Lord wants us to live. And being nice to your neighbor just so that he’ll let you borrow his boat is certainly not true love either.

Neither is true love standing by and letting people commit whatever sins they feel like committing. Many so-called Christian churches today like to advertise that they “Love ALL!” and “Welcome ALL!” that they are “inclusive.” That is code language for saying that they’ll let you believe whatever you want and doing whatever you want – for example – sleeping with whomever you want regardless of gender or marital status. True love does not mean letting people harden themselves in their sin and walk away from God and his Word and will. That would be cruel. People who do not walk with Jesus will end up apart from Jesus forever! True love means calling a sin a sin. True love means doing that in a kind and gentle way, not sounding like we are better than they are. I’ve done that a number of times and had people even yell at me as they told me to leave their house. In verse 18, Paul acknowledged that it is not always possible to live in peace with others. But we’ll try. I’ve also had people thank me for pointing their sin out to them.

Also, true love does not mean letting yourself get used and abused by others. If your neighbor asked to borrow \$100, you might lend it to him. But if you gently ask him about it a few weeks later and he says that he lost all of that and all the other money he had on playing the lottery, do NOT lend him another \$100 the next week. You would actually be enabling his sinful waste.

The Apostle Paul explained (:19), “**Leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written:** (Deuteronomy 32:35) **‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay.’ says the Lord.**” Instead of attacking the person who wronged us, we should step aside and let God take care of it. In other words, God does not make you a deputy to make sure that justice is carried out in the world. Let the Lord – who is far wiser than we are – take care of the matter. I know, we don’t like to let go. We want to make our neighbor suffer as much as we did and even more. The Lord often uses the government to take care of justice. (And, yes, he knows that the government is not so perfect.) The Lord is asking you to trust him. He can handle things in your life. You and I have NO IDEA how the Lord is going to work things out.

True love, forgiving people, means not seeking revenge against them. It means to give up our “right” (in the eyes of the world) to get even with others. This last week I read about a Lutheran school teacher who had to discipline an unruly student. The student was not a member of the church. When the father heard what the teacher did, he approached him and punched him in the eye, knocking him flat. The teacher said that where he fell, there was a fist-sized rock by his hand. He picked up the rock and was ready to use it to hurt the father! In his head, though, he heard these words from Romans 12, dropped the rock and walked away. He let the Lord take care of it in the way he knew was best. That’s true love.

Paul takes true love to another level when he continued by quoting from Proverbs. True love does not just mean giving up our right to get even, it also means being concerned about our neighbor and helping him. Paul put it this way (14), “**Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse.**” Then he quoted the Lord himself (:19), “**If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.**” True love means giving the other person whatever would be best for them at that moment. A quick comment about that phrase in verse 20, “**In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.**” Theologians smarter than me debate whether this means to make the person blush with shame because of your kindness toward them or if it means that God’s judgment would burn them. Either way, showing true love to others who hurt us will make them uncomfortable in some way and, prayerfully, lead them to repentance.

#### Knowing where true love comes from

I’m sure you have realized, as I have, that by ourselves we are not able to show true love. Some say, “There’s a little bit of goodness in everyone.” They did not get that idea from the Bible. The Bible makes it clear that we began life as an absolute heathen. We were totally corrupt spiritually. Showing true love to those who hurt us is the most unnatural thing in the world to us. A life of love is something that needs to be revealed (think of Epiphany) to us. It is not something that we would ever come up with on our own. True love is NOT going to come from inside of our hearts. Even though we were reborn spiritually when our sinful nature was drowned in our

baptism, that sinful attitude keeps coming back and keeps trying to take control of our hearts and words and actions again.

It is not easy to live of life of love, is it? Some (most? all?) of you have been hurt very bad by others. People have been nasty, downright evil, to you. I know how some of you have lost a LOT of money, or how you have suffered terribly physically and emotionally and how you are still hurting – often inflicted by family. I am not making light of your pain and neither is the Lord. The Lord's heart breaks for you. He hurts when you hurt and cries with you. God has, literally, felt such pain in the person of Jesus Christ, our Savior. He knows, even more than any of us, how it feels to be rejected, used, abused, laughed at, hurt, discriminated against and treated unfairly.

Paul spent the first 11 chapters of Romans detailing how doomed and damned we were and how good and gracious God has been to each and very one of us. You have already been saved! Your sins are already forgiven! You have a place reserved for you in heaven! In chapter 12, now, Paul teaches us how a Christian will strive to live in this world until we get to heaven. In verse 19 Paul calls believers “**dear friends**.” It has also been translated as, “beloved” or “dearly beloved.” It's the same root word that's in John 3:16. “**God so LOVED the world** (including you.)” God showed you unilateral, unending, commitment even to the point of death. By nature, we were God's enemies, but God befriended you! God made you his dear friend!

Do you get the point here? We were the ones who rejected, used, abused, laughed at, hurt, discriminated against and treated Jesus unfairly. But the Lord (Psalm 103:10,11), “**does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.**” Even as spikes were ripping through his innocent flesh, Jesus never complained that it was unfair. Instead, he prayed (Luke 23:34), “**Father, forgive them.**” He did not say, “forgive the soldiers” who were pounding the spikes. He did not say, “forgive the Jewish leaders” who were literally laughing at him. He kept it as general as possible, “**Father, forgive THEM.**” which includes you and me. Until we see ourselves at the foot of the cross and acknowledge that our sins are the cause of the cross, we can not live a life of love. True love does not come from inside of us. It comes from the cross of Christ and – Alleluia! – it comes to us. It comes to us through Word and Sacrament.

Certainly, that sinful nature will keep trying to take control of our hearts and words and actions. Be aware of that. It's never going to be easy to live a life of love. Spending time with God's Word will give you the strength to push back against that sinful nature. When you are tempted to open your mouth and throw verbal darts at those who hurt you, open your mouth and take Jesus' own body and blood in that you might, again, taste and see that the Lord is good to you. I like the advise of Thumper in the “Bambi” movie, “If you can't say somethin' nice, don't say nothin' at all.” Whenever a dirty thought of revenge slips into your thinking, take another bath. Relive your baptism. Let the forgiving flood of God's love in Christ wash away your dirt and renew your spirit to live a life of love.

### Knowing how true love shows itself

How does true love show itself? Paul summarizes (:21), “**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**” This is the same concept of what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount and what we call, “The Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Treat others the way that you would like to be treated. There are a million ways to show true love in your lives. I'll spare you such a long list, but consider some thoughts.

The first place to practice this life of love is with those who are closest to you – your spouse, your family, your family of faith here at church, your neighbor, your co-workers and classmates, those whom the Lord has placed into your life.

Also, when someone stings you, do not instantly assume the worst. Luther encouraged us “to take their words and actions in the kindest possible way.” Can you imagine how many hurt feelings and arguments could be avoided if everyone did that? Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. They won't fit, but try to understand what pains and issues and struggles they might be dealing with in their lives. In our broken world, so many have been hurt or abused so often by so many that they do not even know what true love feels like or looks like or sounds like. If you could listen to their hearts, you might hear them screaming, “Pain! Fear! Confusion! Insecurity!” Sometimes all of that spills out in nasty ways. It does not excuse the way they have hurt you, but maybe it will give you pause before you react. Maybe it will move you to be concerned and pray for them and try to help them.

And before you flame someone on social media, or send that evil email or terrible text... just don't. As you look at people around you in your life, keep asking yourself, “What can I do that would help them? What do they need the most?” A glass of water? A sympathetic ear? A pat on the back? An encouraging word? A prayer?

In his book, “Little Lamb, Who Made Thee?” Pastor Walter Wangerin tells the true story of a high school basketball game. The teams were already rivals with a history of hatred for each other. It was an intense game and the lead exchanged sides several times. Coaches were screaming. Fans were insulting each other. One little spark would have lit the gymnasium on fire with furious fights. One of the points guards – a Christian – got burned by the other point guard who made a quick cut around him for an easy layup. Instead of retaliating with an elbow to the ribs as he ran past, he complimented him – “Nice move.” Surprised, the other point guard smiled and said, “Thanks.” Soon, those two were playing like friends having a fun game in their backyard. Their attitudes and actions were contagious. The game was still intense, but the anger started ebbing. Players were helping players from the other team back to their feet when they fell down. Coaches calmed down. Fans started smiling. Do you know who won the game? Jesus. Good overcame evil. And the same thing is happening every day as you live a life of love. Amen.