

LUKE 6:27-36

I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 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. 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 he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

CAPITAL “L”

Luke 6:27-36

I'll bet you can't guess what the capital “L” stands for this morning. Might it be Little? Or could it be Large? Maybe it's Lascivious? Perhaps it's Life. That's an important “L” word. Until I went to seminary and took the mandatory speech class (mandatory for all because we were all going to be orators). I was diagnosed by Dr. Beeners with a speech defect. Seriously! He told me I was swallowing my “L's”. Oh, my! I was guilty of forming them in the back of my throat—“La La La.” That just wouldn't do. The correct way, I was instructed, is to form them with the tongue behind the front teeth: “La La La.” Fortunately, there was a cure. I was instructed I must endlessly recite a poem with the proper formation of the Letter--*Lovely Lilly Lying All Alone Along a Lonely Lane*—until I could do it in my sleep.

So what is the word that begins with a Capital “L”? It's Love, of course. You knew that. It appears in our scripture six times. And it is referenced as a behavior, not an emotion. And that is an important distinction because we toss around the word “love” in many different contexts with as many different meanings. It can express enjoyment: “I

loved that movie;" or I just loved that chocolate cream pie." Or it can express a more inner feeling: "I love my country"; or "I love to travel." And, of course, there are the romantic emotions: "I'm falling in love"; or "I'm falling out of love."

The ancient Greeks, as you may know, had three different meanings for love: *Eros* was romantic, sensual love. It is the root word for "Erotic." *Philia* was brotherly affection. It is the root word for "Philadelphia," the City of Brotherly Love. Which is ironic because Philadelphia is undoubtedly one of the meanest cities in the country—Eagles fans booed Santa Claus and a shooter slaughtered people on the Fourth of July. Our scripture, however, is *Agape* which is defined as unconditional, sacrificial love. It is expressed by a person who is willing to do anything for another, including sacrificing themselves without expecting anything in return. It is the Love with a Capital "L".

That is a particularly challenging sort of Love in our society right now which is hemorrhaging anger and hatred. All you have to do is look at recent polls which reveal that about three quarters of Americans including Democrats, Republicans and Independents believe that our democracy is imperiled. And well over fifty percent are less than thrilled over the prospect of another Biden vs. Trump scenario for the '24 presidential race.

And only a scant third of the country affirm the legitimacy of the Supreme Court. These are scary numbers which foretell a very rough election year ahead of us. And the way Congress is working right now described by former Trump Chief of Staff and GOP Party Chairman Reince Priebus as “middle finger, wrestle mania politics” gives us little hope that the heat will cool and we’ll all do kumbaya together. It will more likely be additional incidents like January 6.

The prospects of closing the ever-widening divide among us are dim to say the least. Those on both sides of the abortion rights fight hold deeply emotional beliefs which defy compromise in any form. The same can be said for the right to bear arms. That’s just the Second Amendment, but even the First Amendment is under siege with the banning of books and the power to determine what is taught in schools. These are really all or nothing issues that stoke the flames already burning.

Jesus puts us on our heels when we attempt to put our faith into action on any of the issues that divide us. He is preaching a pure Agape message. Which of us can live up to this? Realistically, probably no one. *Love your enemies...do good to those who hate you...bless those who curse you...pray for those who abuse you...Really??* We are pretty good with small case “I’s”. But if we are to begin to cool the flames of rage

engulfing our society, we are going to have to do a better job with the capital “L”. That is the difficult “L”.

The starting point is admitting that the “other side”, whoever that may be for you, holds what for them are legitimate viewpoints. And this means that you must acknowledge that your truth is not the truth for everyone else. In fact, there are probably many truths (small case “t”) surrounding any issue dividing us. For example—and let’s take a hot one—the Dobbs decision rendered by the Supreme Court last year overturning Roe v. Wade boils down to protecting life. Which at its foundation is well and good and who would argue over protecting life? But it’s not that simple. Does the life of an unborn fetus take priority over the mother’s who is carrying it? And there are so many cases where a woman’s health is dangerously affected by carrying that fetus to term. There are so many ifs, ands, and buts in this debate and it is not my purpose to wade into them. I am just pointing out that we will never reach a consensus on this. And no matter where we fall does not make us a good or bad person.

Therefore, the starting point for living out of Agape is to stop criminalizing those who disagree with us. If we can just do that much, we can build a foundation for going to the next step: *Loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us and praying*

for those who abuse us...Our reward will be great and we will be children of the Most High...Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. We do not have to agree with another person to respect their humanity. Shall we get started?

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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