

(Romans 13:8-10 NRSV)

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

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Love, Not Stardust

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Love is such a central thing for us Christians. When Jesus was asked to say what was the most important thing, he said it was love. Paul, in this morning's passage from Romans, agrees with him. He says, if you have love, you have everything, you have all you need.

And, of course, we think highly of love, too. Our songs, our novels and our movies are filled with love stories. We cry at weddings, in part, because young love is so beautiful and optimistic. We declare love on birthdays and wedding anniversaries, on Mother's Day and Father's Day. We dream of meeting our true love. We long for families and communities where we love one another, where we live in loving harmony, where there is never heard a discouraging word, as the old song says. Love is the message of Christianity. It is also the message most every religious tradition from the ancient, like Buddhism, to the contemporary, like the new age spiritualities. We all agree that it is love that counts.

Love is at the center. And we know that love is stronger than anything else. Love overcomes every boundary. One of the favorite plays from Shakespeare is Romeo and Juliet, in which the love Romeo and Juliet had for each other was stronger than family and political animosities. The play is a tragedy because Romeo and Juliet die. But they remain the heroes of the drama, because they loved each other, even more than life itself.

I was interested to learn that stories like Romeo and Juliet are shared by many cultures, some far from Elizabethan England. There is an old Aztec tale which explains the origin of two neighboring volcanic mountains, Iztaccíhuatl and Popocatepetl.

Iztaccíhuatl was the legendary daughter of an Aztec king whose kingdom was under siege. Needing the enemy vanquished, he assembled all of his warriors at the foot of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli, the war god.

"Iztaccíhuatl is the most beautiful maiden in the land," he told the warriors. "He of you who is the bravest in the battle will claim her as his wife."

Popocatepetl was the bravest and strongest of all the warriors. And he had long loved Iztaccíhuatl, but only from a distance, for he was of common stock, his father a simple farmer. He was so low in the social order that he had to avert his eyes when the princess was near him.

Iztaccíhuatl was aware of his love, and the two had met secretly in a garden near her quarters when Popocatepetl had been a palace guard.

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In the battle that ensued, Popocatépetl was the mightiest warrior, turning the tide of the battle and driving the enemy from the walls of the city. Because of his bravery, he pursued the enemy beyond the walls and back to their own land.

While he was gone, jealous suitors got the ear of the king. Izztaccíhauhtl was his only daughter and for her to marry a common soldier, the son of a farmer, was an insult to them. They convinced the king to send assassins to kill Popocatépetl. When the assassins left the palace, the king told Izztaccíhauhtl that Popocatépetl had died in battle.

The grief-stricken princess died of love lost before Popocatépetl arrived back, having defeated the assassins. When Popocatépetl found his love dead because of treachery, he slew the king and all the nobles. Then he built a great temple in the middle of a field and laid the body of his beloved atop it. He set a torch over her body so that she would always have light and warmth. He built another temple for his own body and placed a torch above where he laid down to rest, joining his love in death.

An eon passed, the temples grew into tall mountains and snow encrusted them for an eternity, but the fires within them still burned.¹

Love transcends royalty, it beats treachery, and it even makes great mountains of snow and fire. This is the kind of story that fills our heart with warm and tender feelings.

The question is, is this love we know so well, this love of Romeo and Juliet, this love of Izztaccíhauhtl and Popocatépetl, this love of our love songs, movies and romance novels – is this the love that Jesus and Paul are talking about? The most obvious answer is, probably not. We somehow know that Jesus and Paul are up to something more substantial than the love of our love songs, and more significant than the love of tragic lovers.

Over the years Christian theologians like Anders Nygren have tried to help us understand the difference between Christian love and the kind of love we usually talk about. They have gone back to the several Greek words for love, to show us the different meanings. There is the Greek word *eros*, erotic love, physical love, desire, passion. And our theologians have assured us that Paul and Jesus were not talking about *eros* love. There is the Greek word *storge*. *Storge* is the kind of love a parent has for a child. And then there is the Greek word *philia*, which is the love of friendship. The theologians say that we are getting closer to Christian when we think of love as parental love or friendship, but we aren't quite there yet. Finally, there is the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* is selfless love. It is love that cares for another. It is love results in acts of mercy. It is Mother Theresa kind of love. This love, according to theologians such as Nygren, is true Christian love.

There are many distinctions worth noting in these various versions of love. But it seems that Christian love is distinguished from the others principally in that it is not necessarily characterized by warm and tender feelings. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, to love those we

¹*Aztec Blood*, Gary Jennings, Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, New York, 2001, pp. 387,388.

don't even like. And he is not asking us to will ourselves to have warm fuzzy feelings for those we do not like. He's telling us to be gracious and merciful to others, even others whom we dislike, to strive for their well-being, to treat them with kindness and regard, and to do them no harm. The kind of love Jesus is talking about requires us to care for others even if we have no feelings of fondness for them.

It is terribly important to grasp that Christian love may cut against our feelings. Christian love may ask us to treat another just exactly the opposite of how we want to. Indeed, nearly every religion I know places at its center a kind of love that is higher than, is more than, is more demanding than, liking your friends. When you hear anyone using their religion to justify hatred, you can be pretty sure they are misconstruing their religion. When you hear a Christian using God to justify hatred, to justify calling another an abomination, you can be pretty sure that Christian doesn't really understand Jesus' most central message.

This is really pretty amazing. Almost every religion I know compels its followers to rise above their base instincts and to love those they don't even like. How amazing that is! How amazing it is, especially when we consider how religion is so often marshaled for the purpose of condemnation. How often do we hear religion used to justify the hatred of one against another? In every religion, among Muslims, Jews, Christians, for example, one often sees horrible acts of hatred and violence justified and committed against those they believe to be evil. Jesus says love your enemies. He says it's easy to love your friends. But he says that's not good enough. And so when you hear anyone, no matter how religious they are, saying that it's okay to hate your enemies, you know that they have not yet grasped the full meaning and the full requirement of love.

Love requires care and mercy, compassion and kindness. Love requires care and mercy, compassion and kindness, even when our strongest inclination is hatred and harm. It is a tall order, but it is the core of our religious tradition.

*** I remember asking my mother why anyone would want to be a Christian. I remember that she nearly choked her coffee across the table when I raised the question. I don't really remember her answer, but I think it had something to do with whether I wanted to roast in hell for eternity. But I still think the question is a good one. Why would anyone want to be a Christian when it demands that you love those you don't even like, when it demands that you love even your enemies? That's hard work. And what is there to gain? Why should I love those I dislike? Why should I love those I have every reason to dislike?

Let's reflect a moment on where we have come this morning. We have tried to understand what Jesus and Paul are getting at with love. From the beginning we have understood in our heart of hearts that they were talking about something beyond Romeo and Juliet, beyond even family love and friendship. Paul says that love does no wrong to a neighbor. Jesus says, "Love your enemies." And we have noted that some theologians have gone back to the Greek to find that the Greek language and the Bible itself uses different words for different kinds of love. So we have come to understand not only that Jesus wants us to love our enemies, but that this kind of love is entirely different from loving your wife.

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There is just one problem. If you look at Greek literature and at the Bible, too, you will see that the Greek words for love are freely intermingled. That is, *agape*, *eros*, and *philia* are used often interchangeably. So what am I saying? Am I saying that all these distinctions are meaningless? Maybe. Am I saying that Jesus didn't really mean that we should love our enemies? Not at all.

Jesus understood that finally, when we near the kingdom of God, when we are Christians at our best, all these forms of love weave into one strong braid. Anything short of the full braid is incomplete. And getting our minds and hearts around loving when there is no feeling of love is not only the hardest part, but it is also the lynch-pin.

Why should we love our enemies? To get to heaven? You may well get there by loving your enemies, but I don't think Jesus would think much of that motivation. To make the world a better place? There is no doubt that more acts of love and fewer acts of hatred will make the world a better place. But there is an even deeper reason.

Frederick Buechner says, "Sometimes liking follows on the heels of loving. It is hard to work for somebody's well-being very long without coming in the end to rather like him too."² We train ourselves by what we do. What we become is in large measure determined by how we act. Jesus understands that love doesn't always come naturally. There are many situations in which love is not how we feel. But Jesus understands that love is a discipline which can change even the way we feel. If we act with love, we will become more loving. If we love our neighbor, even our enemy, the chances are we will at some point become friends and like each other.

Love often requires this act of will, this loving when we don't feel like it. I know many couples who think their marriage is broken down when the intoxicating feelings of being in love fade, as they almost always do at some point. But what Jesus understands is that in those moments if you act with love, rather than run out of the marriage in search of that lost magic, you may be surprised to find that the strong feelings of love will ultimately return.

In our world there are two possibilities. We can hate or we can love. We can decide to act based on hatred, or we can decide to act based on love. I think we know which choice is more destructive, even on the surface of it. But consider this: when we love, we become more loving; when we hate we become more hateful. Every time we make the choice, it ripples through our very soul, and it flows from there out into the whole creation. The question, then, is what do you want to create in the world, and what do you want to create in your soul? The choice is yours in every decision you make. Amen.

²Wishful Thinking, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1973, p.54