**February 16, 2020** Matthew 5:38-48

***How Do I Love Thee…***

**Scripture:** Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18;

*NRSV (1)The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: (2)Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. … (9)When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. (10)You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (11)You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. (12)And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. (13)You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. (14)You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. (15)You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. (16)You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. (17)You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. (18)You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

Matthew 5:38-48 NRSV

*(38)"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (39)But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; (40)and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; (41)and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (42)Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (43)"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44)But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45)so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (46)For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47)And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48)Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

**Notes:**

1. Who we are on the ***outside*** says a great deal about who we are on the ***inside***.
   1. ***Live*** lovingly with one another.
   2. It is a matter of the ***heart***.
   3. Love is a ***necessity*** in the life of God’s followers,
   4. Love that reaches out to ***everyone***.
2. Love is "***not***" nice.
   1. Love often involves the ***pouring***out of yourself.
   2. To love is to care, provide for, and show ***affection***.
   3. A good friend is there when you ***need*** them.
   4. Nice may be part of love, but love is not always ***nice***.
3. What is ***love***?
   1. If love ***dwells*** in you, you will be a loving person.
   2. you begin to ***love*** in all kinds of new ways.
4. How are we to ***live*** out this love?
   1. We are called to ***love*** God; to ***love*** Jesus Christ.
   2. We are called to Love our ***neighbor***.
   3. We are called to love ***ourselves***.
5. "Hate put me in prison. Love's gonna ***bust*** me out."
   1. Love is a ***healing*** ***balm*** that heals wounds and scars.
   2. Who we are on the ***outside*** says a great deal about who we are on the ***inside***.
   3. Love, requires a decision for each of us to ***love***.

**Transcript:**

A Priest walks into a preschool to perform some of his duties, roaming the halls to make the children feel important, accepted and loved. He notices all kinds of interesting things taking place there; some people smile at him, some give him a hug for no particular reason, some ask him questions. This day as he walks down the hall, he is stopped a child who was not old enough to read. She called him by name and asked this question, “Why do you dress so funny?” His response was, “Well, I am a priest and this is my 'uniform,' so to speak. The way a doctor wears a white coat and a stethoscope, a fireman wears a uniform and so on; and this is what I wear.” And then she pointed to his collar, saying, "Well what's that! It looks like it would hurt!" He told her it was my collar, it was made out of plastic, and I took it off. He told her she could even touch the embossed letters on the back of the collar. While she was doing so, He asked, "Do you know what those letters read?" And she said, **"Yes, of course I do! Kills ticks and flees for up to six months!"**

I had to laugh when I read this, this past week. But I realized that what we wear on the outside says a lot to others about who we are on the inside. If I were a banker, I might wear a suit and tie every day. If I were a policeman, I may be wearing a uniform with all the proper safety gear. If I liked to play golf, you might see me in a polo shirt and khaki pants. The same is true of our actions. Who we are on the outside, says a great deal about who we are on the inside. This is precisely one of the messages we are offered in our passages today.

We are looking at two passages the first being Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 and the second Matthew 5:38-48. Words that encourage us to live in a way that others know what we believe and words that tell us to strive to be perfect as God is perfect. Would you stand with me as we share in the reading of God’s word.

(1)The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: (2)Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. … (9)When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. (10)You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (11)You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. (12)And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. (13)You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. (14)You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. (15)You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. (16)You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. (17)You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. (18)You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; NRSV

(38)"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (39)But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; (40)and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; (41)and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (42)Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (43)"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44)But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45)so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (46)For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47)And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48)Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.Matthew 5:38-48 NRSV

In Leviticus, God instructs the Hebrews to live justly, kindly, and lovingly with one another. It is not enough just to say you are part of the Hebrew nation or even just to "say" you are a follower of Yahweh. Yahweh's people live by Yahweh's law and His chief law is to love the other. So, here God tells the Hebrews what that love "looks" like. He says things like, "…[do] not steal from one another or lie to each other [do] not take advantage of others," and so on. But it is not just a matter of do this and don’t do that; say this and don’t say that. It is, frankly, a matter of the heart. So this passage ends with a clear command from God: “You shall not hate in your heart anyone.... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself:” and then to put his stamp on it he says, “I am the Lord.”

That is a passage that is familiar to most of us; It is something Jesus draws from in our Gospel lesson when He tells His followers love is an absolute necessity in the life of His followers, and not just discriminatory love, not just the love we have for our parents, not just the love we have for our spouses, not just the love we have for our children, and not just the love we have for siblings and friends. He is talking about a love that reaches out to everyone. Jesus says you have to go far; in fact, He says, "*I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...."* Loving the other...whomever that "other" may be is evidence that we are, in fact, children of our Father in heaven. When it comes to love, if we follow Jesus, we don't have an "out."

But what might authentic Christian love look like in our world today? "How do I Love Thee?" wrote the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. How are we to go about this command to love? Let me offer a few reflections. First, by saying what love is not. Second, by suggesting what it is and then lastly, by offering some arenas in which that love is to be carried out.

How do I love you? How do I love them (people I do not know), how do I love my enemies? First, we must agree that love is "not" nice. Niceness may be part of love, but those of you who live in any kind of loving relationship know that it is not always nice. Love, as any father or mother will tell you, is often painful, often sacrificial, often involves the pouring out of yourself things we do not necessarily associate with being "nice." You may have heard your parents say this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you. I will say I didn’t understand that statement until I became a father and it was me saying those words.

A parent knows that part of his task to love a child is to care for them, we provide for them, and show affection to them. A parent also knows there are those times when he or she must pull back and objectively offer discipline. It is true for loving parents that "Discipline hurts me more than it hurts you." A spouse knows they are called upon to be caring supportive of their husband or wife. But there are times when he or she must pull back and say "No," to abuse, addiction or neglect. A good friend is there when you need them that is both for support but also for those times when he or she must pull back and say "no" to destructive behavior.

Jesus was loving. He was love incarnate. He healed. He taught. He performed miracles. He blessed children. He raised the dead. All of these were loving acts. But He was also loving when He turned over tables in the temple saying "You will not make my Father's House into a den of robbers," and driving men out with a whip. He was also loving when He told the religious leaders of His day that they were "vipers, hypocrites and white-washed fences," because they were leading people down the wrong path to salvation. And He was loving when He encountered the woman caught in adultery, and He showed her compassion, not only by ***not*** condemning her, but also by telling her, "Go, and **leave your life of sin**." Nice may be part of love, but love is not always nice.

So what is love? Well, Paul gives us a pretty good idea of what it looks like in I Corinthians 13. We have probably all heard this passage again and again, most often read at weddings. He tells us that love should look something like this:  "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast; it is not proud. It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*" This is, in some sense, what "love" is supposed to look like. What you are on the outside says a lot about who you are on the inside. If love incarnate dwells in you, then you will be a loving person. It is not that you are perfect, not that you always get it right, but increasingly more and more you begin to love in all kinds of new ways.

So let me go back to that question, "How do I love Thee?" How are we to live out this love? Let me suggest just a few crucial ways. First, we are called to love God and specifically, for Christians to love Jesus Christ. In John, Chapter 14, Jesus tells His followers, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments...." That chief commandment is, of course, love; thus to be able to fully, richly, love, we have to be connected to that Divine Source of love. There is no other way around it. God is love; and in order for us to love others, we must love Him; which means surrender ourselves to Him as He is revealed in Christ Jesus.

This means that we wake with the prayer on our lips, "Today; not my will, but Thine be done," and then seek to live out that prayer by constantly handing over ourselves to God in Christ. So, we must love God. We are also called to love our neighbor. If we love God, we will naturally begin to love those around us.

There is a rather well-known story that is shared an American journalist was assigned the task of reporting on Roman Catholic hospitals that were in China. One day as he was touring one of these hospitals, he came across a nun who was cleaning the gangrenous sores of a soldier. The reporter looked at her and said, "I would not do that for a million dollars." The nun is said to have continued her work and said, " **Neither would I, but for Christ, I would**."

When we love God in Christ, then we will be able to carry out work that we could never have imagined before doing. God will flow through us so that we can love, more and more, all we encounter. Now of course we are to love those in our work, those with whom we attend church, those we encounter at the supermarket. But I also want to suggest that there is an inner circle of this love and that consists of those relationships given to us in our children, our spouses, our friends, our parents, our siblings. Jesus loved, but He also had an inner circle of Apostles, and within that circle, the smaller circle of Peter, James and John.

Some years ago, a well-known leader of youth movements throughout the country died. He was heralded for all he had done to benefit the teens of our nation. Sometime later, a teen was found desecrating his grave. He was arrested and brought in and found to be the child of the youth leader. In shock, the arresting officers asked him why would he do such a thing. The response was startling, "All those things he talked about; he did for everyone, for everyone but me." It is possible to be a loving person to those on the surface of our lives, but we are also called to love, even more deeply, those intimate relationships around us.

Finally, we are called to love ourselves. This is not "selfishness," as one might think. George Gallup once said, "A selfish person is one who is 'me-deep' in conversation." A selfish person is always looking out for his or her best interest. The world revolves around them and their concerns, joys, hurts, successes and failures. And yet, Jesus says we are to "love our neighbor as our self." We are to love ourselves. What does that mean? This means we are to give ourselves to those things that will better enable us to be the people, the loving people, God calls on us to be. There were times when Jesus had to pull away and be alone. There were times when enough was enough, and when He went off to be alone.

He calls us to pray, rest, worship...study His word. But He also calls us to allow these times to speak God's love to us. It is in these kinds of tasks that we find where we fall short of what God wants us to be; offer that to God's redemption, reconnect with the love God has for us in Christ the love that is perfect and whole, pure--and relentless in its pursuit of us. When we know God loves us like that, we can begin to do the same.

So we are called to love God, love our neighbor and love ourselves. You may be asking how can I do all three of these? Toward the end of the movie *The Hurricane* from some years ago, we find the lead character, professional boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, talking with a young boy named Lesra. Carter, Rubin is a victim of the false testimony of a racist, He is about to be re-tried after being unjustly convicted and imprisoned for 20 years. Rubin looks on the boy and says, "We've come a long way...little brother..." Lesra nods and says, "Rubin, I just want you to know--if this doesn't work, I'm bustin' you outta here..." "You are, huh?" says Carter. After a moment of silence, Carter gets quiet and says, "Hate put me in prison. Love's gonna bust me out." And Lesra responds, "Just in case love doesn't, I'm gonna bust you outta here." Carter laughs and reaches out, touches the boy's face, He wipes away a tear and then clenches Lesra's hand. And he whispers, "You already have, Lesra." Lesra's love had already freed Carter from that dark prison of despair and loneliness.

In a sense, love is very, very practical. It means we reach out to God, It means we reach out to others and it means we even reach out to ourselves and it is in doing this that we begin to unlock prisons, prisons of selfishness, sin, unforgiveness, hurt, pain, loneliness. Love is that healing balm that makes the wounds go away, but not just the wounds; love even makes the scars go away.

Perhaps you have been hurt by something in the past. Perhaps you have been scarred by the actions of another; Perhaps you have been damaged by the events of this world; Maybe, just maybe you have been bruised by your very own decisions and actions; Allow the Lord to show you his love and start the healing process. Allow others to enter your world and begin healing relationships But, forgive yourself, and begin to love yourself for who the Lord made you to be Do not allow yourself to be identified by the events that brought you to this place. Do not become identified by who you are because of the events of this world.

So let me end where I began... who we are on the outside says a great deal about who we are on the inside. Maybe there is someone around us today who needs released from their prison...maybe we need to release God from a cage of our design, a prison that's holding Him back and away from us... maybe it is someone as close as a phone call, or the person in the pew or chair next to us maybe...maybe it's even—our self; the person we see when we look in the mirror. Love, in the end, does not require a cozy feeling so much as it does require a decision...a decision each of us to love.

"How do I love Thee?" By loving God; my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by loving my neighbor and those I encounter in my daily travels, and by loving myself the way that God does and has intended me to do so. "How do *you* love Thee?"