

**“Plain Talk About Christian Love” Luke 6:27-38**

Wendell Berry has been a farmer outside Louisville, Kentucky for over 50 years. And during those 50 years, he has also found time to write several novels, books of poetry, and collections of essays.

The title character of his novel *Jayber Crow* is a barber in the little country town of Port William, Kentucky. In the book, he finds it hard to get along with a man named Troy Chatham who is buying up land in the county because Jayber believes that Troy is destroying the land.

And it doesn't help that Troy has married Mattie, the woman whom Jayber has loved from afar for many years.

At one point in the novel, it is the late 1960s and the hot topic for discussion is the Vietnam War. Troy is a fervent supporter of the war. And one evening in the barbershop, he lets everyone know how much he despises anyone who would protest the war.

*“They ought to round up every one of them SOB’s,” he said, “and put them right in front of the (darned) communists, and then whoever killed who, it would be all to the good.”*

*There was a little pause after that. Nobody wanted to try to top it. . . .*

*It was hard to do, but Jayber quit cutting hair and looked at Troy. He said, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.’*

*Troy jerked his head up and widened his eyes at the barber. ‘Where did you get that crap?’ he asked.*

*Jayber said, “Jesus Christ.”*

*And Troy said, “Oh.”*

*It would have been a great moment in the history of Christianity, except that Jayber did not love Troy.”<sup>1</sup>*

Jayber and Troy remind us that Christian love is not easy. Christian love is difficult. Christian love is different. Christian love is not the kind of love that we celebrated ten days

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-05/talking-enemy>

ago on Valentine's Day with heart-shaped boxes of candy and sweet cards declaring how much we adore each other.

**Christian love is love for your enemies. It is not sending a valentine to someone who makes your heart leap with joy. It is doing good things for the people who hate you. It is blessing the people who curse at you and insult you. It is praying for the people who mistreat you, who have hurt you in some way.**

**It is refusing to retaliate or seek revenge. It is giving up on trying to get even. When someone slaps you on the cheek, Christian love is turning the other one. When someone takes your coat or anything else that belongs to you, Christian love keeps us from going after them and making them give it back.**

**If we were to read this in any other book, if these words were to come out of the mouth of anyone else, we would agree with Troy Chatham and call them a bunch of bull or a load of bunk.**

**But we read it right here in the Gospel. These words come straight out of Jesus' mouth. And if we want to follow him, we will take these words seriously.**

**Taking these words seriously means recognizing that this kind of love is not a simple matter. It is tough to love like this. Christian love is not just something that we can turn on like a light switch.**

**We might like to think that we could be like Joseph in our Old Testament lesson this morning. His brothers had thrown him down into a pit and sold him into slavery. But Joseph tells them not to worry about it. He is not going to do anything to get even. In fact, he is going to take care of them and provide food for them so that they will not starve during the famine. Everyone hugs and kisses and all is well.**

**But do you remember what happened before all of that? At first, Joseph didn't find it so easy to love those who had mistreated him. It took him a good while to get to a place where he could love his brothers.**

**When they first showed up in Egypt, Joseph recognized them even though they did not recognize him. And so he toyed with them for a little bit. He accused them of being spies and threw them into prison for three days.**

**They had come to Egypt to buy grain and they gave him the money that they had brought. When he gave them their grain, Joseph had the money put back into the bags so**

that he could accuse them of being thieves. And later, he planted a silver cup in his brother Benjamin's bag and told them that Benjamin would have to remain in Egypt as his slave until they could go back home and get their father to return with them.

Even one of the fathers of faith like Joseph was not able to move directly from getting hurt by his brothers to loving his brothers. It just goes to show you that most of us will not be able to love our enemies fully and immediately. Christian love is something that we grow into over time. Christian love is the kind of love that needs to develop or mature. It takes time.

It takes time to live into this kind of love because it goes against the grain of everything that our society, our world, calls love. You don't have to be a Christian to love the people who love you. You don't have to follow Jesus to do good things for the people who are good to you. You don't have to be much of anything really to give to someone who will give you something in return.

That is the kind of love that the world expects. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. That is the kind of love that the world celebrates. And that kind of living, that kind of loving, is fine so far as it goes. But none of us need Jesus to love like that.

We need Jesus to show us a different way to love. We need Jesus to strengthen us to love in a way that breaks all the normal expectations of "*You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours*".

Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Jesus calls us to do good to those who seek to do us harm. Jesus calls us to give to those who will never give us anything in return.

Jesus calls us to be children of the Most High. He calls us to be children of God. And that means that Jesus calls us to be *like God*.

Jesus challenges us to love in the same way that God loves. And in the way that Jesus lived and died and rose again, we see exactly the way that God loves.

In his letter to the Roman church, the apostle Paul reminds us that we were once God's enemies. Yet even though we were his enemies, God sent Jesus to save us by dying on the cross for us.

When soldiers came to arrest Jesus, he didn't fight back. Peter pulled his sword and cut off a soldier's ear. But Jesus reached out, touched the man's ear, and healed him, doing good to someone who was trying to do him harm.

And when he was arrested, Jesus was beaten and they slapped him on the face. They ripped the clothes from his back. They cursed him and insulted him.

And then, near the very end, he prayed for them saying, *“Father, forgive them.”* He offered them mercy. He blessed them.

That is Christian love. That is the love of Jesus Christ. And we can only love like that if we are shaped by that love.

What makes it so hard is that we find ourselves being shaped more by the way that others treat us than by the way that God has treated us. We are guided not by the love of Christ but by the behavior of our enemies, by the people who hurt us or curse us or hate us.

There is an old parable that I like quite a bit. It is about a holy man who was meditating one morning under a tree near a river. The holy man noticed that the waters were rising and a scorpion was caught in the tree’s roots. The scorpion was sure to drown so the man reached down to free him from those roots.

But every time that he did, the scorpion struck at him with its tail. After a while, another man came walking by the river and saw what was happening.

*“Silly fool,”* he called out to the holy man, *“don’t you know that that is a scorpion? And the only nature of a scorpion is to want to sting!”*

But the holy man replied, *“That may well be his nature, sir, but it is my nature to save. And why should I change my nature because of the scorpion’s nature?”*<sup>2</sup>

And if the Spirit of Jesus lives in us, his nature will become our nature. Our actions will not be determined by what anyone else has done to us. Our lives will be transformed--probably not all at once but over time, we will be able to see a difference--and we will grow in the love of Christ.

This kind of love changes us. And this kind of love changes the world. When our enemies mistreat us, when they take from us, when they hurt us, when they insult us and curse us, the greatest danger is that they will make us like them. If we strike back against them, if we treat them as they have treated us, if we seek revenge, we allow them to make us in their image.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/enemies\\_living\\_your.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/enemies_living_your.htm)

Yet as our lives grow in the likeness of Christ rather than in the image of this world, as we love our enemies, as we do good to those who hate us and persecute us, the love of Christ spills over. The love of Christ runs over. The love of Christ overflows and begins to change the world.

The Central American nation of El Salvador endured a brutal civil war throughout the 1980s. More than 75,000 people were killed during the conflict. A Catholic priest named Jon Sobrino writes<sup>3</sup> about being in the capital city of San Salvador on All Souls' Day during that awful time.

Several people had come to an altar and placed cards there. And on those cards, they had written the names of family members who had been killed during the war. They were not allowed to go to the cemetery and put flowers on their graves so they painted flowers on those cards.

Sobrino noticed that there was one card with no flowers on it. And that card contained these words: *"Our dead enemies. May God forgive them and convert them."*

After they had celebrated Communion, Sobrino asked an old man about that card.

*"We made these cards as if we had gone to put flowers on our dead because it seemed to us they would feel we were with them,"* the old man said. *"But as we are Christians, you know, we believe that our enemies should be on the altar, too. They are our brothers in spite of the fact that they kill us and murder us. And you know what the Bible says. It is easy to love our own, but God asks us also to love those who persecute us."*

Yes, he's right. Christ does ask us to love our enemies and to bless and pray for those who persecute us. Christ asks us to receive his love into our hearts and into our lives so that we may be changed. And as we are changed, as we are transformed, bit by bit, day by day, this world may be changed.

We are not called to defeat our enemies. But we are called to win them over. It is not easy. But our prayer is that they will be converted even as we are converted. As we have received the love of Christ, we hope that they too will receive the love of Christ through us. And this love can change them as it also changes us.

For it is only Christian love that has the power to heal and transform the entire world. May it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?item\\_topic\\_id=964](https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=964)

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**