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Matthew 5:43-48, Luke 10:25-37
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A Time for Love and Hate

Facebook provides an excellent illustration of our final lesson from Ecclesiastes before we move into Advent next week.

Who would have thought that we could find so much love and so much hate in one place? One minute someone is posting pictures of their grandchildren, a birthday celebration, or a beautiful sunset. The next minute, someone is tearing into another person because they disagree politically, religiously, or culturally.

I suspect most of us have friends or family members whose social media posts we sometimes avoid. Not because we don't love them, but because we simply don't want to get pulled into another argument!

My friends, life consists of more than likes, dislikes, heart emojis, and smiley faces in the Metaverse! Amen?

I hope you have enjoyed our brief journey through the Book of Ecclesiastes with the Wisdom Teacher. We have been reminded that there is indeed a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die,
A time to plant and a time to uproot,
A time to kill and a time to heal,
A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time to mourn and a time to dance,
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
A time to embrace and a time to refrain,
A time to search and a time to give up,
A time to keep and a time to throw away,
A time to tear and a time to mend,
A time to be silent and a time to speak.

And today we arrive at our final dialectic tension: There is a time to love and a time to hate.

Now, it would be easy to find passages in Scripture that support both sides of these statements. When we read the Old and New Testaments together, we sometimes encounter what appear to be conflicting messages. We also see examples of religious people who misunderstood God's commands and used them to justify their own behavior.

Sometimes reading Scripture can feel a little like getting caught up in a cyclone. There is so much swirling around that it can be difficult to know what we are supposed to take away.

And then we get to Jesus.

Jesus helps us sort through what matters most. He challenges the things we have gotten wrong, strips away the things that get in the way, and points us toward the heart of God.

Today we turn to Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke.

Matthew places the Sermon on the Mount near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It is, if you will, his *magnum opus*—a summary of the kind of life God desires for us. But before people could understand what Jesus was teaching, they first had to unlearn some things that had been ingrained in them for generations.

Turn with me to Matthew 5:43–48 and then Luke 10:25–37 as we hear what Jesus has to say to us about love and hate.

Matthew 5:43–48

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.

Luke 10:25–37

25 An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" **26** He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" **27** He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." **28**And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" **30** Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. **32**So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and

said, ‘Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Nowhere in the Old Testament does God actually command us to hate. In fact, Scripture teaches quite the opposite.

Leviticus teaches, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.”[1]

And Proverbs says, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you.”[2]

So where did this idea of loving your neighbor but hating your enemy come from?

The way that people often interpreted the command from Leviticus was that it assumed neighbor meant someone who was like us. Israelite to Israelite. Not people who were not like us. So there was some incorrect assumptions as to what God intended.

Hatred is often something we learn. It gets passed down from one generation to another through fear, insecurity, prejudice, and misunderstanding.

Jesus understood how easily hatred could take root. Remember when he warned his disciples to be on their guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees? Just a little yeast can work its way through an entire batch of dough.[3] In the same way, a little hatred can spread through an entire community and shape how people see everyone around them.

We see this happen all the time.

Children can learn to dislike someone simply because their parents dislike that person's family. People can grow up believing that an entire group of people is dangerous or untrustworthy without ever having had a meaningful conversation with anyone in that group.

Before long, we have created our own little categories: Us and them. People who belong and people who don't. People who are like us and people who threaten our way of life. Isn’t that what we’ve allow to happen in American politics today?

The Hebrew word for hate used in Ecclesiastes is *sane*. It means to detest, be hostile toward, or be utterly against someone.

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[1] Leviticus 19:18

[2] Proverbs 25:21

[3] Matthew 16:5

In Jesus' day, many Jews viewed non-Jews as unclean Gentiles. They were different. They believed differently, worshiped differently, and lived differently. Their presence was seen as a threat to the purity of their own religious and cultural identity. They were not the neighbors they were called to love in Leviticus.

So it became easy to put people into opposing camps.

Us and them.

Let me be clear about something. Hate is not the same as disagreement.

We can disagree with someone without hating them. We can strongly disagree with government policies without hating the people serving in government. We can even criticize the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians without being antisemitic. And we can stand against antisemitism while also recognizing the suffering of innocent people.

We need to be able to hold those distinctions.

Disagreement is simply part of living together in a diverse society. Hatred is something different. It reduces another human being to an enemy rather than recognizing that person is someone created in the image of God.

Now lets look at the opposite side of the coin. The Hebrew word for love is *ahav*, meaning to have affection for someone, like, or befriend.

Jesus calls us to something much deeper than simply being nice to people who are nice to us.

He says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."[4]

Now, that's a pretty tall order!

It is easy to love people who agree with us, support us, and make us feel good about ourselves. But what about the person who irritates us? The neighbor who complains about everything? The relative who brings up politics at the Thanksgiving table? Or the person whose opinions make our blood pressure rise?

Jesus says to pray for them.

And here is something worth considering: It is awfully difficult to keep hating someone when you are genuinely praying for them.

Prayer doesn't necessarily change the other person. But it can change us. Prayer softens our hearts and reminds us that the person we are tempted to dismiss is also someone God loves.

Sometimes the best way to overcome our assumptions about another group is to actually spend time with them. Sit at their table. Listen to their stories. Get to know them as fellow human beings rather than as some group we have been taught to dislike.

Again, love doesn't require us to agree with everyone. But it does require us to treat others with dignity, kindness, and respect.

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[4] Matthew 5:44

This is where Jesus' teaching about the Golden Rule becomes so important.

Jesus says, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."[5]

We call this the Golden Rule. It encourages us to take the initiative in showing kindness, serving others, and treating people the way we ourselves would want to be treated.

But there is also something called the Silver Rule. It appears in various religious and philosophical traditions and is expressed in the negative: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you." The Silver Rule encourages restraint. Don't hurt people. Don't mistreat them. Don't do something to another person that you wouldn't want done to you.

Then there is what we might call the Iron Rule, which is often used by those who believe power and force are the best ways to get what they want: "Do unto others by force before they can do unto you." In other words, might makes right. Get them before they get you. Eliminate the threat before it becomes a problem.

We see these three approaches playing out in our world every day. Sometimes even in our own relationships.

And that brings us to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus tells this story in response to a lawyer who asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, in typical rabbinical fashion, turns the question back on him and asks what the Law says.

The lawyer responds correctly: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus tells him he has answered correctly.

But the man wants to justify himself, so he asks one more question: "And who is my neighbor?" As if to test Jesus about what Leviticus taught who was a neighbor and who was not.

Bible scholar Arland Hultgren suggests that the question is really about where we draw the line. How large must the circle be? If I know who my neighbor is, then perhaps I also know who my neighbor is not. In other words, whom am I required to love, and whom am I allowed to ignore?[6]

Jesus answers with a story.

A man, most certainly a Jew, is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, an eighteen-mile stretch of road that descends roughly 3,500 feet through rugged and dangerous terrain. It was known as the Road of Blood. Its rocky cliffs and narrow passages made it an ideal place for robbers and bandits.

Sure enough, the man is attacked, stripped, beaten, and left for dead.

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[5] Matthew 7:12

[6] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000), 94-95.

The robbers are living by the Iron Rule. Take what you can. Hurt others before they can hurt you. Might makes right.

Then along comes a priest. He sees the injured man but crosses to the other side of the road. A Levite comes along next. He sees the man, too, but also walks around him. Perhaps they were worried about becoming ceremonially unclean by touching a dead body. Perhaps they had somewhere important to be. Whatever their reasons, they, though fellow Jews, chose not to get involved.

Maybe they were living by something like the Silver Rule. Don't touch. Don't get involved. Don't do anything that might cause them trouble.

And then comes the Samaritan.

Now, this is where Jesus' audience would have been surprised. They would have asked, "A Samaritan? Nah!"

You see Jews and Samaritans were enemies. There was generations of hostility between them. Jews regarded Samaritans as religiously inferior. Samaritans viewed Jews as arrogant and self-righteous. They had plenty of reasons to dislike one another.

Yet Jesus makes the most lowly, despised person the hero of the story.

The Samaritan sees the injured Jewish man and is moved with compassion. The Greek word translated as compassion is *splachizomai*. It describes being deeply moved, even in the innermost parts of one's being. He doesn't simply feel sorry for the man. He does something about it.

He bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, places him on his own animal, takes him to an inn, and pays for his care. He risks his time, his money, and his own safety to help someone who, under ordinary circumstances, would have considered him an enemy. He doesn't stop to ask whether the man deserves his help. He doesn't ask about his religious beliefs, political opinions, or family background. He simply sees a human being in need.

And that is the point Jesus wants us to understand.

The Samaritan lives by the Golden Rule. He treats another person the way he himself would want to be treated.

Notice how Jesus changes the lawyer's question.

The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus asks, in effect, "Who acted like a neighbor?"

The answer is the one who showed mercy. And then Jesus gives him a new command that leaves very little room for interpretation: "Go and do likewise."

It's one thing to talk about loving our neighbors. It's another thing to actually do it.

Think about the person who is stranded on the side of the road. We might see them and wonder whether we have time to stop. We might assume someone else will help.

Or think about a new family moving into the neighborhood. Perhaps they look different, speak a different language, or come from a different religious background. Do we make an effort to welcome them, or do we simply keep to ourselves?

There is an interesting phenomenon in social psychology called the Bystander Effect. When several people witness someone in need, each person may assume that someone else will step forward. The more people present, the easier it becomes to think that helping is someone else's responsibility.

But Jesus doesn't let us off the hook that easily.

The question isn't whether someone else will help. The question is whether we will be the kind of neighbor we want to have?.

And that brings us to the heart of the matter.

As much as we would like to think of ourselves as people who always live by the Golden Rule, we know that isn't always the case. Our natural tendency is to look after ourselves first. We weigh the inconvenience, the cost, and the risk. We wonder whether the other person deserves our help.

That's why we need Jesus.

Jesus is the true Good Samaritan. He is the one who comes looking for us when we are wounded and unable to save ourselves. He finds us in the broken places of our lives. He binds up our wounds with forgiveness, lifts us out of the pit of sin, and restores us through his grace. And he doesn't wait until we deserve it.

Think about that for a moment.

We were not God's friends because we had earned his love. We were not rescued because we had always done the right thing. God loved us first. The Apostle Paul says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."[7]

Jesus lived the very love he teaches. He welcomed outsiders, touched the untouchable, ate with sinners, and extended mercy to people others had rejected.

Even on the cross, he prayed for those who were putting him to death.

This is the love of God made visible in human form.

The Apostle John puts it beautifully:

"Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God, and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."[8]

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[7] Romans 5:8

[8] 1 John 4:7-11

So, as we come to the end of our journey through Ecclesiastes, is there really a time to love and a time to hate?

The Wisdom Teacher reminds us that life is filled with seasons and tensions. But when we look through the lens of Jesus, something changes. Jesus calls us beyond the boundaries we draw around love. He challenges our assumptions about who deserves our kindness and who belongs outside our circle.

He doesn't tell us to love only the people who love us back. He tells us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and show mercy to those in need.

So as we gather around our Thanksgiving tables this week, let us practice a little of what Jesus teaches. Even if there is someone sitting across from us whose opinions drive us crazy, perhaps we can listen a little more, judge a little less, and remember that we are all people in need of God's mercy.

And when we encounter someone in need along the road of life, may we be willing to stop, show compassion, and offer a helping hand.

There is a time for everything under heaven. But when it comes to loving our neighbors, Jesus shows us that the time is always now.

Amen.