

There’s a church with the words “Love Your Enemies” chipped in stone over the front door. The minister there says of his people, “If they ever looked up, they’d never come inside!”

He has a point. “Love your enemies,” Jesus said, along with things like, “love one another, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

I’m waiting for us in the church to be charged with too much loving! We who name ourselves ‘Christian’ have been charged with many other things over the centuries.

But have we ever been guilty of too much loving? We’ve struggled over correct doctrine, had people executed because they didn’t believe like we do, didn’t look like we do.

We’ve split churches over interpretation of scripture, and we’ve argued back and forth over new forms of worship, different kinds of music.

At times we’ve been called too liberal and other times, too conservative. We’ve been charged with being irrelevant and trying too hard to be relevant.

We’ve been accused of being boring and by others of not being reverent enough.

But have we ever been charged with too much loving?

Well, they say you can’t command people to love.

Isn’t love something you either feel or you don’t? Doesn’t love come from the inside and can’t be forced or bused or learned from required reading or legislated or the result of a summit meeting?

They say you can’t make laws about love...except Jesus did.

“This is my commandment,” he says, “to love one another...” And before we even have a chance to raise a hand and ask for the details, for just how he expects us to do this, he says, “Just as I have loved you.”

John recorded that commandment in his gospel, and in this letter, he’s an old man and he never tires of insisting on this – that if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you must accept and obey his commandment to love.

“The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters, also.”

He goes back to this commandment over and over, as if some Christians in his church are ignoring it...that’s why I wonder if in the history of the church, we’ve ever been charged with too much loving.

They say you can’t command people to love. Except, Jesus did.

And that command is at the heart of all Jesus said and did on earth. It is not a command with conditions or amendments to it – it is absolute – part of the radical obedience God requires.

“To live under the absolute demand,” says Joseph Sittler, “is the only way, given the human power of self-deception, to keep life taut with need, open to God’s power, depending upon God’s love, forgiveness, and grace.”

Your life, my life, is taut with need – for we do not love as we are commanded.

Let’s be honest, we love as we want to.

Without the absolute demand of this law of love, we will always choose to make our own exceptions, and we will choose whom to love, and we must realize that we will make enemies of those we refuse to love.

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Now don't misunderstand Jesus. He was no romantic idealist, walking around Galilee like some off-beat religious Johnny Appleseed.

He was a realist. He knew the Roman soldier was a vicious storm-trooper. He knew the tax collector was a crook. He knew the religious leaders were cruel hypocrites. He knew that the crowd of screaming people who pushed around his cross were blood-thirsty and murderous.

He had no illusions, yet he loved them all. Even if we had no commandment, we would be stuck with Jesus Christ and the way he lived and died, as John writes, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loves us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

You've sung that hymn "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." Well, how will they know if our love is merely a little more of the same old thing?

Listen, the Christian gospel is not a mild-mannered suggestion to be nicer, kinder, neater, sweeter, every day.

Even though some people want to make it that way. I remember a newspaper that in its section with the comics had on the top of the page the "Hints from Heloise" column, solutions to household problems; below that was the "Dear Abby" advice column for personal problems; and below that was the column from Billy Graham, as if the gospel was just another advice column along with getting stains out of the carpet or your in-laws out of the house!

Can we obey Jesus by going along in the same old way we've been going? No, we cannot; somehow, we've got to be different.

God's love in Jesus Christ is more than a matter of loving someone simply because they are a human being – that kind of love is a generic love, not love in the particular.

And the particular is where we need to start – "because you get closer to Christ," as Mother Theresa said, "by coming closer to each other."

And that's so hard – Paul tried to deal with it in his churches; Peter and James wrote about it; and I think it's at the bottom of John's focus on this command to love – getting people closer to Christ by coming close to each other.

But the walls of hostility that Christ broke down are being rebuilt every day to keep us apart.

We isolate ourselves from people whose views differ from ours, whose culture is different; or as my friend Jim Moss puts it, "We worship the idolatry of skin color"; and, once isolated from them, they become adversaries and "others," whom we caricature and demean.

For every one of "us", there is a group of "them." What happens when one of 'us' meets one of 'them'? Like a Montague meeting a Capulet, like a Jet meeting a Shark, like any one of 'us' meeting any one of 'them' – we live in our separate groups and feed off each other's fear and hatred with vitriolic slogans and biting, chewing innuendos until we meet and we feel the tension rising, the anger choking inside, venom rising to the fangs!

It happens in the hallways of our Capitol, on the streets filled with angry people, along the cubicles of our offices, among the hallways in our schools, we hear it in the words of our opinion-masquerading-as-news programs, we feel it as we treat others as less than the person God loves – and people die – emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

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What I hear in Jesus' command is to begin where we are to bring love into one life at a time.

When I think of someone who has done just that, I think of Mother Theresa who talked about her way of loving:

I picked up one person – maybe if I didn't pick up that one person I would not have picked up all the others.

The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if we don't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.

Same thing for you. Same thing in your family. Same thing in the church where you go.

Just begin...one, one, one.

Or like Reverend Billy said at the beginning of his worship service when our DOOR mission group was there, "We're going to love you and there's nothing you can do about it!"

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Long before the Beatles, Jesus said love was what you need – he's not asking for a vague feeling of goodwill; he's not seeking consensus for respect.

After all, Jesus didn't die on the cross saying, "I feel for you...I respect your position...I see both sides."

I grew up in a generation that sang about free love, but the way Jesus loved us is costly. In the end he paid for it with his life. Jesus died on the cross because he loved us.

This love that John talks about, this love Jesus commands of us is not free – it costs you and me.

As author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

As Christians, it is not our job to push a partisan political agenda in our communities of faith. Our faith is founded on the lordship of Jesus Christ, not on membership in a particular political party.

But, as Christians, no matter what our political affiliation may be, it is our job to work for

justice, to raise our voices and speak the truth in Christian love - even when it may be uncomfortable.

As Christians, it is our job to call sin by its name and to engage in confession and repentance. As Christians, it is our job to love one another as Jesus loved us.

To be clear, this is not always easy to do.

I am reminded of Will Campbell's unconventional approach to racial reconciliation.

A major civil rights activist, he was lampooned by the right and left alike for his work with Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham and Selma and for his chaplaincy for KKK members, his brother being one.

He saw himself as a bridge, and reconciliation was his life's work, but he described his mission as an attempt to unravel a "knot of contradictions".

Love in the Bible is always more than a feeling, more than a measure of respect – Love is an act, a deed, a living for, a giving to, and nothing less!

Just as some lady at a conference on values and ethics put it this way:

"There's a lot of people who talk about doing good, and lot of people who argue about what's good and what's not good.

There are a lot of people who always worry about whether they're doing right or wrong.

But there are some people who just put their lives on the line for what's right, and they may not be the ones who talk a lot or argue a lot or worry a lot; they just do a lot."

They say you can't command people to love.

But you know what Jesus said.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.