

“AN IMPRACTICAL LOVE”

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Luke 6:27-36

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I almost didn't remember that this past Monday was Valentine's Day. The good news is that my wife Sophie doesn't particularly care about Valentine's Day. I'm happy to say that I married a pragmatic woman. But it felt like this year's version of the day went a bit undercover without a lot of fuss or hoopla. And I suppose when the news of the day is non-stop coverage about truck convoys blocking downtown Ottawa and disrupting border crossings in just about every province in our country, talking about love, chocolate and flowers just doesn't seem all that practical.

I'll get back to the truck convoys later, but first, let's talk a little more about love. When it comes to love, most of us know that being practical has very little to do with it. **I want to ask you to think about the most impractical thing you ever did for the sake of love.** For some of us that might mean going back a long way in our memories. Think about that for a moment. I can see from the smiles on your faces that most of you have been very impractical about expressing your love at some point or another in your lives. I've heard all sorts of stories and I'm sure you have as well. (Sophie leaves everything behind, family, friends, home, language, all for some guy she met and moves halfway around the world, impractical. Better buy flowers!)

In the long ago days before Facebook, Face Time or Zoom, before the internet made long distance phone calls obsolete, I once knew a Korean seminary student at Knox College in Toronto who stubbornly pursued a famous gospel singer who said to him, most people who fall in love tend to begin by being attracted to someone even without really trying, it should come naturally. With you, she said, I have deliberately tried to be attracted to you and yet I find that I am unable to feel any attraction at all. Most guys would have gotten the hint and given up. But even still he persisted, racking up thousands of dollars in long distance telephone bills in one year alone. There's an old Korean proverb which says that even the biggest tree falls if you keep on chopping at it long enough. He kept chopping and ended up changing her mind and they have been happily married for over twenty years now.

It's not hard to be impractical about someone whom we love. We will do just about anything for those we love. We love our families, we love our spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings. We love our friends. If we needed to, I suspect that most of us would even give up our own lives for the sake of those who we truly love. **But we know that there are times when loving even those who are family and friends can be difficult. Which makes what Jesus has to say to us all the more difficult to hear.** Luke's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain begins with the beatitudes and the corresponding woes of warning. Then Jesus continues, ***“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Turn the other cheek, if they ask for your coat, give them your shirt too. Give and don't expect to get anything back.”*** And just when we are ready to bolt for the nearest exit, considering how hard Jesus' words are, he says something that sounds more familiar, more understandable. ***“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”***

Ah, the Golden Rule, do to others as you would have them do to you. Now this is something most of can live with. And we find the Golden Rule, or variations of it, in just about every major religion on earth. I think that most of us value the Golden Rule as a basis upon which to build our lives and our ethics. I don't know how many times I have heard families say to me during preparations for a funeral, that their mother or father or whoever it was that had passed away, had taught them to live by the Golden Rule. Most of us understand the

Golden Rule to mean that we ought to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. Therefore, we should be honest and fair and kind to others.

When most of us think of the Golden Rule we think of it in terms of reciprocity. Theologian Bill Long writes that in the time of Jesus a particular system of ethics guided the way business was done. **The principal commitment of that system was that one's behaviour was scripted by one's prior liabilities.** Or to put it differently, one was bound by obligations, by balanced reciprocity, to repay one's legal and social obligations. You gave expecting to be repaid, you invited to your table those who not only were able to come, but who would invite you in return. You did a favour for someone only if he or she could repay you in return. This ethics of reciprocity greased the economic wheels of the ancient world. **I'm not sure much has changed in our own world today.**

In many ways the Golden Rule, as interpreted by many in our society today, is rooted in the same ethics of reciprocity. Do to others as you would have them do to you. I treat people fairly because I expect to be treated fairly. I give to others because I expect to receive in return. **But the problem is that when Jesus speaks the golden rule, it is embedded in the midst of other commands which changes its very intent.** Most people subscribe to the Golden Rule because it seems to be a practical way of living. If I expect to be treated a certain way, I should also treat others that way. It's practical, it's a win, win situation. **But we started this sermon with the notion that love is often very impractical, and here's where the problem lies.**

If we understand the Golden Rule in the context of reciprocity, we would not love our enemies because we certainly wouldn't expect them to love us. We wouldn't expect our enemies to turn the other cheek so why would we offer our cheek to them in the first place? I wouldn't just take someone's coat without permission, so why should I offer not just my coat but my shirt as well? How many of us would lend money to our friends without expecting to receive it back? Maybe the most generous among us, if any. But now, how many of us would lend money to our enemies without expecting to receive it back? **Love your enemies, do good to them, says Jesus, and we find it very hard to understand. Its impractical, even dangerous at times.**

But listen to the Golden Rule again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If we are listening carefully, we will notice something here. Jesus says, do to others as you would have them do to you, not as they have already done to you. We might understand the golden rule as a reciprocal principle, **but Jesus doesn't give it in that sense.**

Do to others as you would have them do to you, **but the problem is that what we would have others do to us isn't always what they will do.** The question becomes, when we don't know whether others will do to us what we would have them do, or especially when we're pretty sure they won't, **will we still do to them what we should do?** It seems rather impractical, **but when Jesus commands us to love our enemies, doesn't that also seem rather impractical?**

The key lies in the understanding of that word, love. Love, as used by Jesus, comes from the Greek word, **agape**. Agape is rather different from the notions of love that so many in our world are familiar with. It's not about a romantic feeling or physical pleasure. Agape means to love without expectation of return. **Agape is sacrificial love.** Jesus commands us, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. **This is not a love of reciprocity, this is a love of sacrifice. The direction of agape love is always one way.** When two people are in an agape love relationship, where both people love one another sacrificially, there can be no greater expression of love than this. The joy in such a relationship, however, isn't rooted in a reciprocity based love, but rather in the fact that though each loves the other sacrificially, without expectation, the other also loves the same way. There is mutual love, but it is not

based on reciprocity. But rather on the choice of each person to love the other, not out of obligation but out of intention.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you, asks Jesus. Even sinners to that. My friends, we are commanded to love without expectation, without reciprocity.

The Golden Rule is truly this, 'Do to others as you would have them to do to you, but do it **in spite of their failure to do so, despite their unwillingness to do so.**' This is hard to hear. We're not wired to love this way, its impractical, undesirable, impossible, many would say. The truth is that this kind of love **is** unnatural to us and if we are to even imagine loving this way, it needs to start with much prayer, patience and practice. We need to do it over and over again to build up any sense of consistency.

But despite its difficulty, despite its impracticality, Jesus commands us to love in this way. Let me ask you a question. Who do we love with such an impractical love? Can we name anyone who we love in this way? Maybe there might be one or two people, perhaps a spouse or a child or a friend that we have tried to love this way, **but never perfectly, if we dare to be honest.**

Let's go back to the truck convoys. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, is located at the corner of Wellington and Kent Streets in downtown Ottawa, right cross the street from the Supreme Court of Canada and just down the street from the Parliament building. It's at the very heart of the truck convoy that blocked part of downtown Ottawa for the past three weeks. Some of you may know that Janet Norris' father, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Currie was once the minister at St. Andrew's Ottawa during his ministry. **But if you were a member of St. Andrew's or if you lived in that area, could you love the people who were disrupting your life for weeks on end, could you do to them what you would have them do to you?**

The events of the past few weeks have exacerbated a growing antipathy between those who have followed the guidance of the health authorities around vaccination and other restrictions, some for nearly two years, and others who choose not to be vaccinated and who insist that all restrictions and mandates must end immediately. I know that now as gathering restrictions are being lifted that some families, as they plan their anticipated get togethers, will have to deal with family members who hold differing views around issues like vaccination or mask wearing.

Do you go to a family get together or a party to which you've been invited when you know that one of your siblings or cousins or friends hold strong views that are different from yours? When you choose to wear a mask indoors out of care for others but another person just won't wear one, even when you ask them politely, would you still love them, would you still be merciful to them?

It's going to be hard, and going forward, it may be harder than it was before. But Jesus' command to love remains, as impractical as it seems. But I can tell you that each of us is loved in such a way. I can tell you that God loves each of us in this way. **You see, the only way we are going to get any of this is if we get God's love for us. God is impractical in God's love for us. God's love for us is not based on the ethics of reciprocity, and thank God that its not!** You see my friends, we are called to love this way so that we might be imitators of God. Jesus' command to an impractical love isn't grounded in some innate goodness of our own that we just need to coax out. **It is rooted in the character of God.**

God gives of God's grace richly and freely regardless of the fact of whether we can ever repay God.

God is merciful, not because we can reciprocate God's love, but simply because it is God's nature to overflow in acts of loving kindness. If you want to talk about an impractical love, then all we have to do is look at God's love for us.

If you want a reasonable love, a practical love, loving those who love you back, then you don't need Jesus. You can love like that anywhere, we all can. But if you want Jesus, if we know we need Jesus, then his command to an impractical love must be our way. It's not easy, but it's not meant to be. But because it's God's way, it is our way as well. In a couple of weeks, we begin the journey of Lent, to the cross. How would we ever reciprocate God's gift of God's only son? **There could be no way, but that didn't stop God.**

God did to us what God would have us do to God, in spite of knowing that we wouldn't, that we couldn't. But for us it made all the difference in the world, the difference between life and death. **God's love for us is an impractical love but it transforms our lives because it is agape love, sacrificial love, the only kind of love that truly has the capacity to transform.** And my friends, God invites us to love with that same kind of love for others. It may be impractical, it will be difficult, **but it can transform a life, beginning with ours, and it can change the world.**

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.