

## How Can We Mature in the Way of Love?

Friends in faith – neighbors gathered via live stream and in this house of worship on land loved by First Nations and others long before us and which we hope will be cherished long into the future: how can we mature in the way of love? Let's begin this time of reflection with prayer.

God of all, we give thanks for the gift of being freely gathered for worship today – on the occasion of our second Annual Meeting, as we move into our second full year of life as a new congregation. Send your Holy Spirit to help us see more clearly the ways in which we need to grow in our practice of love. We pray as followers of Jesus. Amen.

Within progressive clergy circles (in my various online communities as well as the small group with which I meet in Stillwater to study the scripture texts each week), there has been resounding agreement that the gospel story for last Sunday and today could not be timelier. This vignette about Jesus' visit to his hometown synagogue brims with tension. Our nation is brimming with tension as the new administration begins to pursue its objectives. Tension can spur reactivity or creativity dependent on, among other factors, the spiritual maturity of the players involved.

In today's reading from First Corinthians, Paul urges us to reflect on the ways in which we need to mature in the practice of God's unconditional love – that is, *agape*, which is the use of love every time in that passage. First let's explore how Jesus and his elders navigate a tense situation.

I want to begin by noting that this story is one of numerous stories about the life of Jesus that Christians have historically manipulated in order to characterize Jesus' contemporaries and Jews in every generation since as misguided and wrongheaded – as not even worthy opponents with whom to engage but enemies to be silenced.

I'll offer an example from my own childhood. Kindergarten through eighth grade, I attended a parochial school attached to the church our family attended. My year-after-year key take-aways from this story seem to be erroneous and meanspirited. Here are the main points that five to fourteen year old me understood that I was supposed to believe and incorporate into my life of faith:

- First: Jesus read the scripture in order to tell the people that he was their Messiah, the savior of the world.
- Second: The people didn't believe him, got angry, and tried to throw him off a cliff.
- Third: Since Jesus was God, he performed a miracle of escaping from the angry crowd threatening to kill him.

Today I would argue three very different key take-aways:

Jesus did not read the scripture as a segue to declaring himself the Messiah. The scripture read Jesus and he heard it reflect back to him his inner calling from the Holy Spirit.

Second, Jesus' first century neighbors did not get angry over some second or third century concept about Jesus' divinity and cosmic role as savior of the world, but rather over him confronting them with the work of compassion staring them in the face.

And finally, the miracle was not metaphysical in nature (an act of disappearance) but rather that Jesus maintained enough clarity and confidence to exit the escalating situation.

Let's draw the distinction for a moment longer between anti-Judaism and antisemitism. My seminary New Testament professor, Marilyn Salmon, published a book entitled *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*.

Anti-Judaism is ideological opposition to Judaism. It is the frame of mind embedded within many strains of the Christian faith that says that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Jewish religion so as to render them obsolete. Anti-Judaism says that Christian faith has superseded (that is, surpassed and replaced) the Jewish faith. That certainly sounds and feels contemptuous, yet some of us were raised with that mindset baked into a church's teachings. Antisemitism is a cousin to anti-Judaism. Akin to racism, antisemitism involves prejudicial ideas and practices against people who are Jewish (Jewish being an ethnicity at the intersection of cultural, religious, and geographic heritage).

To believe and push that one religious or ethnic group is more right or valid than others and should therefore have dominance is a violent posture that props up oppressive behavior. It is also very un-Christlike.

Now, I do not use the term "un-Christlike" lightly. Christ comes from the Greek word *christos*, which does mean messiah or anointed one. I do not think that Jesus was anointed by God to rescue his people out of the many-storied, deep and winding journey with God. That supersessionist thinking has been conjured and perpetuated by our ancestors in faith who formed a new religious tradition out of attempting to follow Jesus' teachings. Jesus, on the other hand, always acted as though he knew he was one of many channels for God's love – a way who was open to other ways.

So when we invite Christ light to shine through us during this season of Epiphany, do we understand what light Jesus hoped to shine? Let's hear again the brief words from the prophet Isaiah that resonated so deeply with Jesus:

*“The **Spirit of the Lord is upon me,**  
because [God] has anointed me  
to **bring good news** to the poor.  
[God] has sent me to **proclaim release** to the captives  
and **recovery** of sight to the blind,  
to **set free** those who are oppressed,  
to **proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.**”*

Does your initial response to those prophetic words feel somewhat like the elders’ initial response? Because we heard this: *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* These thoughts can land positively with us and even feel good. Humility – that is, inviting the Holy Spirit to come upon me and anoint me with God’s presence? Sure! Justice – that is, bringing good news, proclaiming release, recovering, setting free, and proclaiming the year of jubilee (that’s the erasure of all debts). Sounds great!

Yet, when the rubber hits the road, we know that we sometimes shrink away from prophetic calls to do the work of justice-building in our own communities. It can be hard to be called to task – to be reminded that we could recommit ourselves to uncomfortable, difficult work. We can shrink back in defensiveness and uncertainty. Fear (the opposite of love) seeps in. That seems to be what happened in that moment with Jesus’ elders. They felt him calling them to task. He wanted to them to look out beyond their current horizon to the cultural other (as had their brave ancestors in faith, Elijah and Elisha, had done). It felt scary and intimidating. They looked around and saw that their companions felt scared as well. So they banded together and lashed out to silence Jesus’ tough talk.

So what allowed Jesus to pass through the escalated crowd that was seeking to strip him of his dignity if not also his life? I think it was maturity in the way of God's love. In a moment, we will look to the Apostle Paul for a few opportunities for maturation that we can watch for in our lives.

But I think what I would like to raise about Jesus' presence in that moment is self-differentiation. And that's a term I learned about in seminary. It follows up on last week's experience of Jesus' clear internal recognition of the Holy Spirit's call.

Assael Romanelli, Ph.D. is a clinical social worker and a licensed couple and family therapist and says this about what self-differentiation means: *"Differentiation is the ability to balance... autonomy and... attachment so it is not an either/or. The more differentiated you become, the closer these two forces become. Essentially, it is the ability to be connected to your thoughts, values, and feelings, while also being close to someone, especially when that person is very important to you."*

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-other-side-relationships/202004/differentiation-is-the-crucial-relationship-skill-you-need>)

Another note on what it means to be self-differentiated within relationships comes from five scholars who shared a study through the National Library of Medicine: *"Differentiated people can maintain their I-position... They can remain calm in conflictual relationships, resolve relational problems effectively, and reach compromises."*

(<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8028039/#S1>)

So can we follow Jesus' example of staying in himself, which was imbued with a love-based sense of justice from God. We know that to be God's truth. Can we do it while not being too reactive amidst the clamor all around us?

Let's turn for a moment to the Apostle Paul for some of these ways of possibly growing up in our practice of love. We heard, *"For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."* Paul goes on to share ideas for how to mature in the way of love. I find them interesting in the same way as the Ten Commandments. We can talk about what not to do, but we can also turn it on its head and talk about what we CAN do.

Following on the well-known words *"Love is patient; love is kind,"* we hear:

*"love is not envious"* – Might you need to learn to celebrate more with the wins and the good things that happen in your friends' and family's life? Can you celebrate instead of feeling envy?

*"[love is not] boastful"* – Can we pause and leave enough space to receive the honest affirmations that come from others when they see us doing good work, hard work?

*"[love is not] arrogant"* – Oh! That one's hard in the time we're living in. Can we really be open-minded and not be absolutely closed-tight sure that we have all the right ideas?

*"[love is not] rude"* – Deeper than Minnesota nice, can we be kind and patient from a place that comes from deep inside of operating with the rudeness that can come so easily from our exhaustion?

*"[Love] does not insist on its own way"* – Can we mature by becoming more genuinely curious about other ways?

*“[Love] is not irritable”* – How can you find more rest such that you have energy reservoirs from which to gather and such that you aren’t interacting irritably with others?

*“[Love] keeps no record of wrongs”* – As we shared in our prayer of confession and longing, we apparently believe that the Love of God keeps no record of wrongs. So will we do that for ourselves and for others? Can we practice grace?

*And finally, “[Love] does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.”* As we move forward, maturing in our faith, will we rejoice and amplify those courageous voices of truth – of love meeting with justice? Love is counting on us. Amen.

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February 2, 2025 | 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Luke 4:14-30, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13