

Love Is Peaceable

Loving the Way Jesus Loves
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Please turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 13 which you find on page 960 in the church Bible. You may have noticed that my colleagues on the platform have disappeared. We will be doing for a little while, at least until we have our new audio visual system, because we finally decided to do something about a lingering problem which is being able to see the pastor on the over the internet broadcast which is has sometimes been a distraction for people tuning in from far away. It also gives an opportunity for our pastors to sit with their families during worship which is also a good thing.

Well, I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. Is there anyone who irritates you? Ha, ha, ha. Of course there is. Someone at home, maybe, someone here at church this morning or a coworker, maybe a fellow motorist on the Schuylkill Expressway or someone behind the cash register. There always seems to be someone who is more than a little annoying.

Robert Browning captures the feeling perfectly and not a little deliciously in his *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*. As the title suggests, that poem is a kind of first person account, told from the perspective of a monk in a Spanish monastery who is watching his brother Lawrence work in a cloistered garden and muttering unkind words about everything Lawrence does. Every movement is an irritation to the monk who is speaking, the way he waters his rose bush, the way he trims the myrtle bushes, everything is an irritation. The monk also describes what it is like to sit with brother Lawrence at meal times and watch him gulp down his orange juice or hear him talk about the weather or listen to his annoying questions.

What is the Latin name for parsley, Lawrence wants to know. What is Greek for swine snout is what the other monk thinks in his heart.

After dinner Lawrence very carefully polishes his plate and washes his goblet. It has his initial L on the bottom of it. Everything about the whole ritual irritates this fellow monk, even the way Lawrence puts his plate on his own personal shelf.

Well, how true to life all of that is. It is not just what people do that annoys us, but sometimes exactly the way that they do it. And by putting this poem in a religious community Browning is showing that we are as likely to be irritated with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we are with anyone.

The end of the poem, the chapel bells are calling everyone to worship and the monk is beginning to recite the creed, but he also is still harboring, to the very last moment, hateful thoughts in his hypocritical heart.

Now most of us are inclined to think of irritability as a kind of natural response to the frustrations of life. We tend not to worry too much about it although some of us may, perhaps, at times, be wise enough to make it a matter for prayer.

I wonder. When was the last time that you asked God to help you respond graciously to that special person who always seems to annoy you?

Well, really, we need to take our irritability very seriously because it is the opposite of love. Do you see this in 1 Corinthians 13 at verse five?

Love is not irritable. Irritability is the antithesis of charity. And so it is not merely a way of complaining about things. It is actually a way of hating from the biblical perspective.

Now this is the first time that we have considered one of Paul's definitions for love as it is drawn for its opposite. And, just as a reminder, we are not taking everything in 1 Corinthians 13 strictly in order. We are connecting it all to the life of Christ and we are considering that chronologically and this particular week I want to talk about this issue of irritability.

And you will notice here throughout the passage the way that Paul defines things. He tells you both what love is and what love is not. That is a good way of bringing clarity. It helps you understand exactly what something is as distinct from everything that it is not. And here the apostle tells us that love is not irritable, a term that has a fairly wide range of meaning.

One of the standard Greek lexicons translates the word as easily provoked or the New International Version has easily angered.

Anthony Thistleton, who is a careful linguist, looks at the whole range of the meaning of this term and he says it can refer either to simple irritation or to outright anger or to anything in between. He likes to use the word "exasperated" as the best translation. And we can probably come up with some synonyms of our own.

Love is not grumpy or grouchy. Love does not get ticked off. Love does not go off on a rampage or a tirade. It does not launch into verbal abuse or by contrast give people the silent treatment or whatever else it is tempting for us to do when we are good and angry.

Now we are living in a fallen world full of fallen people including a lot of people who irritate us, annoy us and make us angry. And all of these are areas where we need to grow. But let's start, at least, with irritability.

When Paul said that love is not exasperated, he may well have included everything up to out and out anger, but you might think of irritability as anger's trigger finger. And if we can learn to address that first rising of anger in the heart, well, then we can begin to learn how to love the way that Jesus loves.

Now I want to illustrate that again this week by a story from the life of Christ. I ask you, please to turn in your Bibles to Mark chapter six and to page 841 in the church Bible, a fairly well known incident from earlier in our Savior's earthly ministry.

Jesus had been teaching and performing miracles by the Sea of Galilee. This is before Jerusalem, before the cross, before the empty tomb. And the story is told of a time when the disciples were irritated and Jesus wasn't and I think seeing then difference will help us to learn how to love with a peaceable love.

Let me set the context a little. It so happened that the disciples were just returning from their first short term missionary trip. They had been sent out two by two without any money or other supplies. And they had been called to preach repentance for sin and to cast out demons and to perform miracles of healing. And what extraordinary days those had been. By the power of God the disciples had seen people turn away from their sins and had seen people whose lives were dominated by demonic power delivered and witnessed people whose bodies were broken by living in a fallen world made whole.

And so the Scripture tells us that they returned to Jesus—this is verse 30—it is the kind of debriefing for the mission trip And they told him all that they had done and taught.

Now the trip must have been exhausting. And by the time the disciples were finished sharing everything that it was on their hearts to share, they were totally spent. We know this because of the way Jesus responds. He cares for them with loving compassion. He offers rest and refreshment.

He says, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."¹

And Mark goes on to explain why it was that they needed to get away from it all. It was because many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat.

Now anyone who has ever served people in need knows that ministry abhors a vacuum. There are always more people who need more help and sometimes we just need to get away and then there is a place for setting that kind of boundary.

¹ Mark 6:31.

So Jesus and his disciples went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. And just at that particular moment it is hard not to envy Philip and Bartholomew and the rest of the 12 disciples. They were alone with Jesus and he was offering them rest and refreshment for their bodies and souls.

And yet, unfortunately, as it may have seemed, things did not go quite the way that they had hoped. You have to remember how popular Jesus was in Galilee. I mean, it was like the paparazzi following him everywhere. He was teaching. He was performing miracles. People were flocking to him. And so when people along the shore looked out across the lake and saw that familiar sail, they judged about where they thought the boat was heading, they rushed along the shore to meet Jesus. That is what Mark tells us in verse three. They recognized the disciples. They ran there on the foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

Now the disciples could be forgiven, don't you think, if they were, perhaps, a little disappointed to see those crowds gathering yet again along the lakeshore. I mean, when would they get chance to eat? When would they get a little chance to rest? And yet Jesus goes straight for the shore, because when he sees the crowd, notice verse 34, he has compassion on these people because they are like sheep without a shepherd. And out of his shepherd's heart he begins to teach them many things.

And I say many things because Jesus went on teaching and teaching all throughout the day. And the longer he went, the wearier his disciples became, not to mention the hungrier.

And finally when it grew late—this is verse 35—they came to Jesus and they said to him, “This is a desolate place. The hour is now late. I mean, look at your watch, Jesus. Send them away to go into the countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

Now from a merely human perspective that sounds perfectly reasonable and absolutely practical. Doubtless it was true that the people were getting hungry. I mean, the disciples certainly were. Remember verse 31. They had no time even to eat. And it was getting late in the day. Soon it would be much too late for all of these people, I mean, thousands of them, to find anything to eat anywhere in the neighborhood. Really, it was time for these people to leave.

And yet as reasonable as that suggestion may have seemed, the disciples were getting rather irritated and exasperated. It is the kind of impatience that builds for hours until finally it boils over.

When they finally speak to Jesus they interrupt his sermon. Pretty audacious, don't you think? And not only that, they speak to him in the imperative mood.

“Send them away.”

There is no please or suggesting about it. It is really a command that they give to Christ. And it is easy to imagine the kinds of things that they may have been thinking to themselves and, perhaps, saying to one another before they finally told Jesus what to do, things like, “I am starving” and “doesn’t he know when to quit?” things like that.

Jesus had a very different idea how to respond and the more we look at what he said and did on this day, I think we see more of his heart of love.

Jesus, first of all, put the demand back on the disciples. That is a lesson in itself, although we are not going to get into it.

“You give them something to eat,”² he says in verse 37.

I mean, if the disciples want to take charge, well, then why don’t they provide dinner.

The disciples thought that was preposterous, but rather than understanding the spiritual lesson that Jesus is push them towards, they respond in a rather sarcastic way.

“Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?”³

I mean, it is a way of saying how preposterous Jesus was being. I think it is another indicator of their irritation.

Now in the end, of course, if you know the story, you know, that it was Jesus who provided dinner for everyone, taking those five loaves and those two small fish and lifting his eyes up to heaven, seeking the blessing of his Father and then multiplying those loaves until everyone ate and was satisfied, all 5000 of them.

In this way Jesus provided bread for his people. Rather than getting irritated with the needy crowd or his pushy disciples, Jesus gave them manna in the wilderness.

Now what can we learn from this story about love?

Well, before we look at Jesus and his love, let’s look a little at the disciples and examine their irritation a little more closely because I think their negative example teaches us many things about our own irritation.

First, the disciples show us who gets irritated. Everyone does, including people who are busy serving the Lord. Remember that when Paul told the Corinthians that love is not irritable he was speaking to believers in Christ who were active in their local church. Christians—and perhaps you have noticed this before—are as likely as anyone to get irritated or exasperated. And the disciples are the perfect example, aren’t they? Or maybe I should say the imperfect example, because they had been serving the Lord by

² Mark 6:37.

³ Ibid.

performing miracles, preaching the kingdom. Now they were with Jesus, watching him work. They have a front row seat for his teaching and his miracle working.

And yet even before they have a chance, really, to come down from that spiritual high, all of their excitement about the things that they had done and seen on their mission trip, they get irritated with the situation and maybe even exasperated with Jesus.

If an apostle can get irritated while he is spending time with Jesus, well, then we can probably get irritated, too, can't we? At least sometimes.

No matter who we are or what we do for God, irritation and anger can be a real spiritual problem for us. And whenever we start to get irritated at someone or something we should see this problem for what it really is, a failure to love. And we know this because the love chapter tells us that love is not irritable. So who gets irritated? Well, I do if I am honest about the sin of my loveless heart.

The disciples also tell us a little something about when we are likely to get irritated, not just the who, but the when. They are tempted to this sin at the end of a long full day after a long trip when they are tired and hungry. And it is true for all of us, physical weakness may well put us in the way of spiritual danger.

And so if we find ourselves getting easily irritated, we may need to take the small but very practical step of getting a little something to eat and drink or taking a little rest, certainly a very practical thing for parents to keep in mind when their children are getting irritated as children sometimes do.

In fact, when we talked about irritation with the opening exercises I am pretty sure every child in the fourth through sixth grade said that he or she had someone who makes them irritated, mostly siblings, I think, but there you have it.

Notice, as well, that the disciples were tempted to irritation right after they had been successful in serving the Lord and this, too, is very true to the Christian life as anyone in ministry can testify. Some of the strongest temptations come right after we have been busy doing kingdom work and the devil is desperate for some way to regain lost ground.

And so if we want to resist the temptation to irritation, we need to anticipate when we are likely to be physically or spiritually weak. And, therefore, are in special need of prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Missionaries should pray for this kind of grace after a season of ministry. Students should pray for this kind of grace the day after a long night of study. Fathers and mothers should pray for this kind of grace before they walk through the door after a long day of work and have to face all of the issues and frustrations of family life.

When we are weak, we can only be strong by the power and the grace of God. And one of the places we need to see that strength is in areas of irritation. But now here is another

lesson, maybe more important to learn from these disciples and that is how irritability treats other people. How does irritability treat others?

Well, basically it doesn't want to have anything to do with them. That is how irritability treats others. When the disciples were annoyed with how long they had to wait for dinner they wanted Jesus to send everyone away. And when we are irritable, we want to get away from other people, too, even if that means keeping those people away from Jesus which, in effect, is what the disciples wanted to do.

Notice, too, that the disciples expect other people to use their own resources to solve their own problems, rather than asking Jesus to help or offering themselves in service as some part of God's solution to a very practical need that someone else has, they push these needy people away and that is what irritability does. It puts what we want head of what other people need or, if possible, even tries to ignore their needs altogether. And the real problem is us, not them.

We need to be honest about that because often we blame people around us for the way that we respond.

"He really makes me mad," we say, as if someone outside of us were totally and directly responsible for our sinful attitude. That is not to say that other people are never annoying. Of course, they are. But the spiritual issue for me is not how irritating other people are, but how irritable I am and how irritated I get.

If we are easily provoked, if we tend to get angry in the wrong way about the wrong things and if that anger often is out of proportion to the situation itself, see that for what it is. It is a clear indication of a loveless heart.

Jonathan Edwards was right when he said what a great word this is. "Love is backward to anger and will not yield to anger on trivial occasions."

That is a good saying to put on your mirror in the morning or, perhaps, on your dashboard.

"Love is backward to anger and will not yield to it on trivial occasions."

And so if do get angry about trivial things, you know, something your mother asks you to do for example or something that someone forgot to clean up or put away or something that they did or that they failed to do that makes your life a little less convenient, the problem is our own failure to love.

Rather than putting the blame over onto someone else...

"If she does that one more time I swear I am going to make her regret it for the rest of her life and she will have only herself to blame."

We need to confess our own need for more of the love of Jesus.

One more thing to learn from these disciples is how irritability responds to God. It is not just others, but God. That is part of the problem here. It is a failure not just to love others, but also God himself.

Now we have seen that the disciples tried to tell Jesus his business and then spoke to him rather sarcastically. They didn't pick up on what he was trying to teach them. In fact, if you look down a little farther, down to verse 52, it is clear they didn't understand what Jesus was teaching them at all. Rather than really trying to understand that. Instead, they made a rather smart mouthed remark instead about, "What do you expect us to do, Jesus, buy food for all these people?"

Irritability is like that. It has a negative view of God. It refuses to seek his help, but, instead, chooses to get angry. And so if money is running short or time is running out or problems seem to be running out of control, the person who gives way to irritation does not trust God to provide whatever is needed.

No, often what we do is exaggerate our problems and then get exasperated with God about how bad they are.

To help us see what irritability does to the soul and how it is connected directly to our relationship with God, Louis Meades makes a very helpful comment. He takes a very familiar saying from Augustine and he paraphrases it like this.

"We are irritable, oh Lord, until we make our peace with you."

And so if you find yourself struggling with this sin of irritation, part of the question you have to ask is: What is this really saying about my relationship with God? It is directly connected.

This is one of the reasons I say that this issue of irritability is actually a serious spiritual problem. Anger, unrighteous anger, as our own anger almost always is, does not just hurt other people. It also hinders our own relationship with God.

Now what irritable people need, I mean, what we need is more of the love of Jesus. And thankfully we see that worked out in a marvelous way here in Mark's story, the true story of the feeding of the 5000, not just an example to follow—although Jesus certainly gives us that—but also a Savior to receive into our lives with all of the life changing power that his Spirit brings.

And just about everything we see Jesus do in this story is exactly the opposite of what the disciples do. He is everything that we are not, a living demonstration of non irritability which is simply another way of saying that Jesus is love.

Now in all likelihood, Jesus was as tired and hungry as his disciples. He was often worn out by his exertions in ministry. We see that in the gospels. This time he had been teaching and preaching all day, very hard work.

I once heard a homiletics professor claim—I can't really back it up with any hard data—but he claimed that an hour of preaching takes as much energy as four hours of physical labor. And Jesus had been working hard in his ministry of teaching people, of meeting their needs. And yet rather than wishing the crowds away and getting irritated when they refused to leave, Jesus kept blessing them.

Here we see him feeding the 5000 with daily bread and with the Word of God and what we are really seeing is what love can do when it is not irritable.

And notice the way that Jesus loves. His love is drawn to people in need. Rather than pushing anyone away, like the disciples wanted to do, Jesus wants to get close. He does it at the beginning of the story. He first sees the crowds—this is in verses 33 and 34.

Verse 34, he sees the crowd and he decides to leave the privacy of his own boat and Mark tells us why he does it. It is because of his love. He has compassion on them, because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

And Jesus regarded their spiritual need as more important than his physical refreshment. And that is what love does. It lets the needs of others set our agenda rather than letting our agenda set limits on how much we are willing to love, especially when we have an opportunity to serve people in a way that will give them an opportunity to hear the Word of God.

A simple, but well known example of the way love moved someone towards people in need, comes from the life of Mother Teresa. It has often been recounted, you perhaps have heard it before, the first time that she rescued a dying leper from the streets of Calcutta and picked him up and fed him and cleaned him and did everything else that he needed, the man asked her why she was doing it.

“Because I love you,” she said.

And that is what love does. It moves towards other people even the very neediest people rather than moving away from them.

And so in loving compassion and tireless service, Jesus kept teaching the people all day. Even when it was time for dinner and the disciples said he really ought to send people away, Jesus was still drawn to them with a heart of love and so he performs this miraculous multiplication, feeding a multitude with five loaves and two small fish.

And notice the way that Jesus does this. I think it is an important detail in the passage in verse 41. Jesus does it by looking up to his Father in heaven.

Understand that the Son of God even in his divine power did his miraculous work by the power of the Holy Spirit. He did it in dependence upon his Father in heaven. There is a triune relationship that is worked out in the miracles of Jesus.

And here is something else that love does. It trusts God to provide what is needed. One of the main reasons why the disciples wanted to send people away is because they were thinking only in terms of their own resources. That is very evident in the response that they give to Jesus about buying the bread. They did not have enough bread to feed 5000 people. That was for sure.

But now until Jesus looked up to heaven and performed this miracle, he did not have the bread either. But he trusted the Father to give him the miraculous power to provide.

And the lesson from all of that is not that if you have the right number of loaves and fish you, too, will be able to work miracles, but see where love finds the strength to serve and to give. It is by trusting in the power and the grace of God.

You know, when people come to us with problems that are beyond us, I mean, they have questions we don't know how to answer, perhaps, or they request things that we really don't have to give or they expect us to do something we don't have the strength to do, oh, how easy it is to get irritated with them for even approaching us.

But love takes what it has on hand, it lifts its eyes up to heaven and asks God to bring a blessing to people that goes far beyond what we ourselves are able to give in our own strength.

And this is the way that Jesus loves and calls us to love. It is by trusting the Father.

Now where do we learn to live with this kind of love? Well, we are trying to learn it, in part, by seeing the love that Jesus has for us. And one of the remarkable things, I thin, in this story from the gospel of Mark is the way that Jesus treats his own disciples. They get irritated with him but he does not get irritated with them. In fact, he treats them with the same compassion that he had for everyone.

You know, the 5000 were not the only people who ate bread and fish that day. Mark tells us in verse 42 that all ate and were satisfied. He may well have been including the disciples in that, but if not they certainly had plenty of leftovers, didn't they? Because, you see in verse 43 the disciples took up 12 baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And what a memorable object lesson that was in the power and the provision of God, a whole basket for each disciple.

I think really we ought to call this incident not the feeding of the 5000, but the feeding of the 5012. That would help us remember, really, what is happening in the whole episode. Those irritable, irritating disciples, even they were well fed, because they, too, were loved by the love of Jesus.

He has the same love for all his disciples. He has the same love for you.

Do you know that this morning? Have you experienced in your own life, have you believed the promises of the gospel for you, the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers, the promise of his peace and presence in every troubled circumstance in life, the hope of eternal life? This is all the love of Jesus that he offers to you.

And even after all of the times that I have been irritated or exasperated with God for what he has done or what he hasn't done, he never gets too tired to deal with me or so irritated that he refuses to do so, but he keeps loving me.

And so it is that all of my own irritating sins are covered by the cross where Jesus died.

And now we are called and isn't it right and proper for us to have that calling to love the way that Jesus himself loves? That is the love he gives? It is the love that we receive? And now it is the love he wants us to give to others, a non irritated, un-angry love.

And yet someone is bound to irritate us each and every day. When they do, how will you respond? You will respond with love if you have the love of Jesus in you life. His love makes us willing to be bothered with other people's problems. It enables us, it empowers us to love even when we don't think we have anything left to give. It enables us to keep trusting God even when we are tempted to be angry with him, as angry with him as we sometimes are with others.

See, when you have the love of Jesus, every irritation actually is another opportunity to love the way that Jesus loves.

C S Lewis has a good way of describing this. Towards the end of his book, *The Four Loves*, he makes the point that all of those frictions and frustrations we meet in our daily relationships are actually the proof for us that our own natural love is not enough. Do you find that you are really able to love people when they are irritating and annoying? If not, that should tell you something significant spiritually, that you do not have enough love within you to be the kind of loving person you know deep down you ought to be. You need something more.

Usually we think that what ought to change is that other person. I mean, we would be loving enough if people didn't go on irritating us all the time, wouldn't we?

Lewis analyzes that way of thinking. He gives a number of examples. He considers the parent who says, "If only I had been more fortunate in my children."

And yet Lewis points out every child is sometimes infuriating.

"If only my husband were more considerate, less lazy." That is what some wives would say.

But the husbands reply, “If only my wife had fewer moods and more sense.”

That is C S Lewis. I can’t remember if he wrote that before or after he was married, but husbands sometimes think that way.

You see, in every one of us there are attitudes and actions that are bound to irritate someone, but that does not mean that we have to respond in anger. If we do get angry, it is a clear sign for us that we need a change of heart, that we need to be filled, for the first time, perhaps, or filled again, with the love of Jesus that comes by the work of his Holy Spirit, because his love is not irritable. And the more we have and experience that love, the love that Jesus has for us, the more we will have that same quality of love in our relationships with others.

What a marvelous real life illustration we had of that kind of love at Citizen’s Bank Park this week. Did you watch the Phillies game against the Nationals? Did you see Steve Montforto up there in the upper deck, the foul ball came curling up. He reached over the railing. He caught it. Great catch. High fives with all his friends. And then he gave the ball to his little daughter Emily, age three. She did the natural thing. She threw it over the railing down into the lower deck. Everyone gasped. It was astonishing, particularly to Mr. Montforto himself. I mean, his first foul ball ever, but he did what a loving father does. He gathered his little girl up into his arms. He embraced her and held her close.

And what a marvelous illustration that is of the love of God. He places into our hands all of these wonderful gifts, gifts we would never be able to catch for ourselves.

We so often throw them away, sometimes not even realizing what we are doing. And yet he is not irritated. No, he wraps us up again in his love and we experience that love again and with the reception of that love, we have the calling to love others with the same kind of love, to love even the people that have squandered the gifts that we have given to them, to love them and to love them again the way that Jesus does.

Our Father in heaven, we pray for this grace. We confess, Lord, that we are all too irritable. We confess that a sin. We ask that you would give us the grace to recognize that those irritations are the way we respond to those irritations is an indicator of where we are spiritually. We seek your grace. We ask for the help and power and presence of the Holy Spirit and for the love of Jesus to fill our lives for his sake and for your glory. Amen.