Loving others is part of our creed as Christians. The idea of loving the unlovable is a thread woven into the fabric of our faith since we could recite “God is love” (1 John 4:7). The harsh truth is that we have a hard time believing it and a harder time practicing love for our enemies. It might be the case that we do not associate with people with whom we disagree. We have no trouble identifying the people we think are wrong, but we avoid them and so we do not really *know* them. We build walls around our personal lives to protect ourselves from the people we see as wicked. Seeking out these people is not a priority for us.

Others may not practice loving their enemies because they disagree with Jesus on this point. They might argue that that loving our enemies enables and encourages them. They prefer the *quid pro quo* approach and cannot afford to give “with no expectation of return” (v. 35). It is a nice sentiment, but loving our enemies is just not the way the world works. We must live in the real world, not in a make-believe world of upside-down ethics.

There are two huge misconceptions about what Jesus is asking us to do here. The first is about*idealism and realism,*and the second is about*love.* It is easy to argue that Jesus was a stargazing, impractical idealist who often had his head in the clouds, looking forward to what the world could be. He comes across as a cock-eyed optimist, not fully grounded*.* We might expand the argument to say Jesus’ ideals are simply ideals, good things to strive for, but can we ever actually achieve them? Because the moment we achieve an ideal, it ceases to be an ideal. It is now in the realm of the possible. It becomes reality. Jesus’ proposal that we love our enemies is certainly ideal, but it is not real; that is, it is not in the realm of the possible for most of us. Jesus’ radical ideals got him crucified.

But we need the idealists of the world to inspire us to accomplish something that would otherwise be beyond our grasp. Without idealists pushing us to be better versions of ourselves, we would settle for far less than what is possible. The inconvenient truth is that we *can* love people we consider enemies because Jesus is only asking us to take *one action at a time with one person at a time*. Everything Jesus suggests – do good, bless, pray, turn the other cheek, give away the shirt on your back – involves humble, concrete, positive action toward one other person. These are simple things we can do to love our enemies, one act of kindness at a time.

Which is why Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a sermon that “far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist. The words of this text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an *absolute necessity* for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies” (italics added).

It appears that Jesus is asking us to act selflessly, but he is not. Jesus says we must not give or lend with any “expectation of return”; but a closer reading of the text reveals that Jesus unabashedly appeals to our innate greed*.* Jesus urges us to love our enemies, because there is no glory or credit in loving those who are already willing to help us (see vv. 32-34). Yet, Jesus explicitly tells us that if we want some kind of “credit” or glory, we must love our enemies. When we do, there is a huge payoff: “Great will be your reward in heaven” (v. 35).

The full statement reads: “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most-High.” Jesus means that if we love our enemies and do not expect anything in return *from them*, we will receive a huge bonus: acceptance into God’s extended family for all eternity. When Saint Peter opens the book of life, there will be a notation by our name that reads: “This person is a child of the Most-High,” and this will be followed by instructions for our eternal “reward.”

So, loving our enemies pays dividends! At the very least, we get a good feeling because we are staying true to the ideals of our faith. We might feel peace, increase in knowledge, deepen our understanding, or reconcile a difference. We might even turn an enemy into a friend. Every good act we perform has multiple possible positive outcomes. This all sounds very practical and very do-able, obliterating the notion that Jesus was out of touch with the real world. On the contrary, Jesus absolutely knew how the world operates!

When Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” he is obviously not speaking of love in a physical sense nor even an affectionate one. He seeks *agape* love, a genuine love that actively pursues good for the other person, especially when that person in an enemy. “Do good,” Jesus commands. He does not say, “think nice thoughts or have warm feelings or say kind things.” He does say, “do good to those who hate you.”

Love, then, looks somewhat different when seen through the eyes of Jesus. It looks downright unreasonable, especially when Jesus proposes a four-fold approach to demonstrate what he means: Love them; Do good for them; Bless them; Pray for them. We might be able to make an argument for doing good. We might muster up the effort to create positive actions that promote an enemy’s wellbeing. But bless the enemy? Pray for the enemy? This is far more difficult than providing a cloak or a meal or a cup of cold water. This requires an adjustment of the heart, but this is the central demand of Jesus’ moral universe: *Love unreasonably*.

When we hear Jesus’ words to love our enemies, we are mindful that we were once his enemies. In our sinfulness, we renounced God, looking to the world for our salvation. As slaves to sin, we did not comport ourselves as children of the Most-High God. But God did not abandon us to our base desires; God sent Jesus, not to condemn the world, but that it might be saved through him (John 3:16-17). Jesus chose to love us when we were enemies of God, doing good for us by dying on a cross for our redemption, blessing us with eternal life, and praying for us before God. Was this unreasonable? Absolutely! We neither earned this salvation nor did we deserve it. God chose to love us, even when we made ourselves unlovable, because God’s love is unreasonable. God’s love defies logic. God’s love redeems unconditionally. God’s love restores us as children of the Most-High God.

To underscore the impudent nature of God’s graciousness, Jesus refers to the practice of buying and selling in the marketplace. “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (v. 38). Merchants rarely “pressed down” or “shook together” measurements because it gave the buyer more than they paid for, a little extra which cut the profit margin. But this is precisely what God does. It is how God’s grace works. In God’s unreasonable love and extravagance, the “good measure” of grace is poured out until it is “running over.”

Franz Stigler chose to love his enemy and escort the broken bomber to safety. His choice allowed fellow pilot Charlie Brown to return to America, marry, and raise a family. When Stigler and Brown met as old men in their eighties, they reminisced about that day, shared stories, and introduced their children and grandchildren. Stigler’s unreasonable love for his enemy, his “good measure” rippled outward, “running over” into new generations. This is what God does for us, Jesus says, so we should do the same for our enemies. Jesus calls us to do the impossible, the improbable, the unreasonable. We are to echo the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “I have decided to stick with*love.* Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Prayer: Ever-loving God, thank You that by faith in Christ I have a new nature. I pray that I may live and grow more like the Lord Jesus in the choices I make. God, I know that I can never love those that hate and despise me with my own strength alone, but I pray that in Your grace You would help me to make the right choices, so that my will aligns to Your perfect will, so that Your love flows through me to others; to Your praise and glory in Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

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**Unreasonable Love**

Sunday, February 20, 2022 [Luke 6:27-38](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+6%3a27-38&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

*A Higher Call* by Adam Makos is a tale of heroism and chivalry. It is the story of WWII Luftwaffe pilot Franz Stigler who refused to shoot down a crippled American bomber making its way back to England. The American pilot, Charlie Brown (his real name!), was on his first mission. Most of his crew were wounded or dead, the plane riddled with bullet holes. Stigler saw that they were in trouble but believed bringing the plane down would be murder. Instead, he escorted the plane to safety, saluting Brown as he peeled off over the North Sea. Decades later, the two pilots met in a well-publicized friendly encounter.

I mention this because *A Higher Call* is an example of two enemies treating one another with respect and kindness. Stigler could have blasted the bomber out of the sky; it was an easy target. Instead, he chose to preserve life and to help Brown’s crew make it home. Stigler pondered what it would be like to be in their situation. He hoped an Allied pilot would extend the same kindness to a German crew. We applaud such stories because they are becoming the *exception*, and not the norm. We raise such stories because they inspire us to do better and to be better than we are. We recall such stories because they remind us that we can choose to make a friend of an enemy. If only we would!

The United States today seems to be a nation of rivals, a house divided, a nation at war with itself. The battle lines we draw are uncompromising, either/or, Me vs. You with no obvious common ground. Democrats vs. Republicans. Liberals vs. conservatives. Big government vs. small government. Vaxxers vs. anti-vaxxers. Maskers vs. anti-maskers. Vegans vs. carnivores. Rich vs. poor. Rural vs. urban. Praise songs vs. hymns. Hot dish vs. casserole. Coke vs. Pepsi. Lutefisk vs. walleye. The Vikings vs. Green Bay. Arizona vs. Florida in the winter. This list doesn’t account for such complex issues as race and climate change.

We might well ask: “With everything that divides us, what in the world is holding us together?” That is an excellent question! What is holding us together? Or, more precisely, *who* is holding us together? Which brings us to Jesus’ words: “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” When Jesus says we should love our enemies, and do good to those who hate us, we agree and nod our heads, and concede that this would be a good thing.