Love of Another Kind

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 May 2019

Preacher: The Rt. Revd Mike Hill

[0:00] I guess we are living in a time when most people are agreed that our society is as divided as it probably has been. You know, you go back into the realms of history, you would probably say that our society was divided during the Wars of the Roses and a little later in history with the great Protestant and Catholic divide in this country. But right now, things seem very, very divided. Brexit or no Brexit, hard left, hard right, the north, the south divide, pro-multiculturalism, anti-multiculturalism, liberal, conservative, the list goes on. And some of that stuff still smoulders in our society. In the context of that, it would be a brave person or alternatively a total idiot who would stand up in front of you and try and say something about love in our culture, not least that rather terrifying piece of scripture that we just had, where Jesus has said, you've been told that, you know, in the law, that you must love your neighbor but hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies. I guess, you know, we kind of read that stuff and we say, yeah, you know, maybe one day. But actually, loving our enemies is something really difficult for you. As Sonia reminded you today, we're kicking off in this church on a new series based on a book which I don't possess, I've never read, and very likely never will do, called The Fruitful Life, written by a guy called Jerry Bridges. And the first chapter of the book, of course, speaks about what others have called the mark of the Christian church, the badge of the church. And that is, we're meant to be loving. It was very encouraging for me, and I hope it will be encouraging for you. That would be about three months ago, I think it was around Christmas, that a young couple came to our church, and I think the only reason they came was that their parents had the habit of church going. It seemed a bit, you know, mean not to come with them on Christmas Day. And so they showed up here, and I went to talk to them after the service, as I'd not seen them before. By the way, if it's your first time, don't worry, I'm not going to track you down or stalk you or anything like that. So I went over to them and started to talk to them, and the first thing the lady said to me is, I had no idea church could be so friendly. Oh, that's really good, you know.

And I imagine if you're a member of this church, that makes you feel good. But what I can tell you is that having spoken at, I would think, at least 500 church weekends over the period of my ordained life, if you ask any church what their strength is, they'll always tell you, oh, we're very friendly here at St. Grotti's. I would say to them, go and ask the people who only come once.

Because it's natural that we gravitate to our friends, that we like to see our friends, we like to talk to our friends, and the great danger of that is that the people who are not our friends don't necessarily get a look in. A bit more about that later in the service. But we're talking about love today. And when you read the title of a book called The Fruitful Life, the biblically literate amongst you will immediately switch to Galatians 5, where Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit. And basically what he does there is he lists a load of kind of qualities, which actually, if we live them, would be living the life that God intended for us.

Let me just remind you what Paul says. He says, the fruit of the Spirit is love, chapter one of the book, peace, sorry, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul goes on, he says, against such things there is no law.

[4:43] This is a massive challenge, it seems to me. You know, I can remember, you know, thinking when Anthea and I had five children all under the age of ten. You kind of think, where's the peace and the peace and the forbearance and the goodness, faithful gentleness and the self-control all gone to? Didn't feel like a kind of banner over our house at that time in our lives.

So it's a challenge for us. And then, you know, that verse at the end of the reading, you know, be perfect. Be perfect. I mean, come on. You know, we're not like that, are we? You know, we have our imperfections. And I was just talking with one of you before the service saying, you know, I am, I'm 70 years old and I am, you know, I've learned the flaws in my life. But it's really difficult

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

eradicating those flaws. And you're all looking like me, like I am the only person for whom that is true in this place. And Paul then, before he talks about the fruit of the spirit, talks about something which he calls the acts of the flesh. This is the way we're not supposed to live. And it reads like this, sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, says Paul, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Don't shout out, but I wonder which, you know, is the fruit of the spirit more true in your life or is the acts of the flesh more true in your life?
And if it's the latter, I would suggest you get prayer ministry pretty quickly at the end of the service. The fruit of the spirit is God's design plan for a fruitful life. And immediately there are two problems. One, it's really hard for us because those behaviors are not necessarily natural to us.
They are, to use a word, counterintuitive. And all these fruits only make sense in the minefield of what we call human relationships. You can't love in a vacuum, though some people apparently try. It's hard to think you might experience any joy if you were the only person on the planet, though occasionally it crosses your mind. I remember years ago, the one and only time Anthony and I went on a marriage enrichment weekend. And it was in this beautiful house in Cambridge, one of the oldest houses in the United Kingdom. And when we got there, I was interested.
[7:55] All the women were gathered around the cake table speaking animatedly. All the men were gathered down the far end looking like cows waiting for a storm to break. And we went into these various...

One of the exercises, I remember this well, was we were given a list of those fruits of the spirit. And the guy starts out by saying, would you like to give yourself a mark out of 10 on how you would rank yourself? How loving are you? How joyful are you? How patient are you? I tell you, I scored well. Better than I ever did in any university exam ever. Then the guy said, now pass the piece of paper to your partner and ask them to mark you. I didn't do that well. Right? See, that reminds us that there's another problem that you and I can add to the list. And it's something that psychology calls delusion.
Thinking. Thinking that we're better at something than anybody else on the planet thinks of us. And it's a really difficult problem. I don't know if this is exclusively true, but as far as I can see, having worked, well, being a man and having worked with men extensively over the years, it does seem to me to be a very observably a man thing.
[9:41] You have no idea how many men I've met from the northwest of England who were double sure that if it wasn't just for a bad stroke of luck at one point in their lives, if it hadn't been for that, they'd have been playing for Manchester United.

So today, I'm here to talk to you about the first fruits, first of the fruits that Paul talked about love. And as our reading, I mean, if it didn't make you think this, you know, let me just help you out for a moment.
As our reading reminds us, we're not speaking about love as our culture understands it. In their excellent book, which is called The Coddling of the American Mind, and you'll be like, well, what's that going to do with me? I'm not American.
Well, they've researched in America, in Canada, in Australia, in the UK. And one of the things they've discovered, they say that one of the wrong things that is being taught in our culture is everything, we can only trust our feelings.
That's a million miles away from the kind of world in which I was brought up, in where really you were told not to give any attention to your feelings whatsoever. We've come to full swing of the pendulum now, and according to these guys in their book, after extensive research, what they're saying is that today's culture in those countries I mentioned feels things very strongly.
[11:18] So if I feel that you have said something to me which is racist, it is racist, it is fact. If I feel that you have been bullying me, you are a bully.

They also say that today's worldview is that the world is full of people who are either good or evil, but today's culture defines evil as those people who don't agree with me.
Thus social media. So when we're talking about love in the Bible, the one thing, I'm sure you've heard this said many times, is that the Greeks were kind of sophisticated people.
The New Testament was written in Greek originally. You do meet people through life who are members of the Prayer Book Society, and you say to them, sorry, who like the authorized version of the Bible, you ask them, why do you like it so much?

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Some of them talk about the language and the poetry. Some of them seriously believe it's the original translation of the Bible. The Bible was first written, the New Testament was in Greek and handed to us.
[12:35] So everything that we read is a translation, but the Greeks had four different words for love. There was a word that they used that was sexual love.

There was a word that described family love. There was a word that described friendship love. And then there's the word that the New Testament uses most, especially when the word love is used as an imperative, when we're told to be loving.
And it's the word, you know this, it's the word agape. So you say in America, agape. I mean, we speak English, what do they speak?
So this word agape is interesting because its primary appeal is to the will and not to the heart.
In other words, it's not primarily about what I'm feeling. It's about what I'm wanting for the person in front of me. That's why it is the stuff of long-term relationships.
[13:44] I think we have a view that we can only think about love as kind of champagne and roses and preferably chocolate thrown in. Whereas the real stuff of love is actually quite tough.

It's about wanting the best for those around you. See, it would be inconceivable, wouldn't it, if Jesus had told us that we should feel really kind of slushy inside for our enemies.
It's not going to happen. If, on the other hand, you set your will to want the best for your enemies. I heard somebody put it like this.
It really helped me as somebody who's managed to make quite a few enemies in my life, not purposely but inadvertently. That if somebody becomes your enemy, tell God that you want to become part of the salvation history of that person.
Even if you can never be friends. In other words, you want to be part of their transformation for good. You know, I always think about, you know, how would you respond if you felt God call you to go and be a missionary to ISIS?
[15:06] You wouldn't mind a bit, right? I mean, you know, the very thought, would that fill you with trepidation? Would you be anxious about that? And would you think that you could ever feel really good in your heart about people who, if they got a hold of you, would behead you?

Could you ever set your will to want the best for them in the hope that God might turn their hearts away from their mindless violence?
I don't know the answer to that, but I think it's somewhere around that. And look, here are some things that you need to know. The first thing is just that the kind of love we're called to model has its origin in the kind of love that God has for us.
So where it says in Scripture, God so loved the world, it means God so agape the world. We're called to love those around us.
By this, said Jesus, people will know you're my disciples if you have love one for another. The third thing is, how on earth can we ever love our enemies?
[16:28] Or even, as Jesus suggests in this passage, can we find ourselves loving the people who don't love us? What Jesus said is it easy to love the people who love you?

What about the people you're not sure about? I.e., quite a lot of people in the world. Where do you find the energy for that? And the fourth thing is, that it seems to me that there are three primary drivers that drive this idea of agape love.
One is grace, two is forgiveness, and three is persistence. So I want to talk to you. I want you to have some take home from this talk.
So I just want to say some things about this agape love. And I'm going to have to leave you to work out where can I apply this to my life this week. The first thing is, this agape love, which has its genesis in the heart of God, is meant to start in the new community, the church.
And we don't love one another. If we don't model that love between us, how is anybody else ever going to get the idea that this is love of another kind?
[17:47] This is the kind of love that means that I might even be able to say, yes, I can love my enemies. And I'm not saying in that that I think Christians have a monopoly on doing good in the world.

I don't believe that. I think it is just self-evidently true. I know many amazing people who are not Christians, not people of faith, but who frankly put me to shame.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

What I am saying is that a Christian who doesn't show this kind of love is a counterfeit Christian. Second thing I want to say to you is, it will demand sacrifice on your part.
Loving your enemies, even loving the people who you don't think love you, is a challenge. And you will probably have to make some kind of sacrifice. You might have to climb down from something. You might have to do something. And again, what's observably true in our world is that there are a lot of people who walk around talking, you know, using these kind of lofty phrases like, I want to make a difference.
[19:00] I want to optimize my influence on the planet. You know, that kind of stuff. But they want to do it without realizing it, that it's going to take sacrifice.

It's going to cost you something. The third thing is, it demands initiative. We need to be, as followers of Jesus, people who always make the first move.
I want to say, and you know, this is so close to home for me. So in our family, we had a situation where we had an amazing relational breakdown. As a lot of things do in families, it involved money. And, you know, one party feeling that the other party did. And we have a long, actually, we have a long history of it in our family. My great-great-grandfather was killed in a carriage accident in Philadelphia.
My grandfather was sent over here with a massive sum of money for his education, which our family in the Northwest embezzled every last cent of and sent into a poor school in Anko's.
[20:09] So we've got, you know, we've got a good track record. And this, you know, it's amazing how these things kind of carry on in families. And we ended up in a real dogfight with a, well, the closest relatives we've got now.

And it was a relative of my wife, and we were so sure they were so wrong, and they were so sure they were so right, and ten years.
I'm standing in pulpits telling people they should forgive each other. And it dawned on me, we're the Christians in this environment.
We've got to make the first move here. Tentatively. Tentatively. We just push the boat out a bit. Tentatively.
They could have dropped a bomb on the boat, but they pushed the boat out a bit from their side. We pushed the boat a bit more. They pushed it. We met with them this week.
[21:19] Probably the fifth or sixth time we met with them over a ten-year period since we had no contact with them for ten years. It was the best yet. And I went, you know, I said to Tentatively, can you believe that we were ever like that with them?

And I wouldn't mind an educated guess. There aren't people in the house today who find themselves, you know, families are complicated these days, aren't they?
See, if you're a follower of Christ, you need to take the initiative. The fourth thing is, imagination will help you. And I can't make you imaginative. I can just tell you, it really helps.
I mean, I love the story of the Good Samaritan in this sense, don't you? The guy didn't just banj him up and take him to the inn. He then got his wallet out and said, send me the bill. He can stay as long as he likes.
I aspired, would I have thought of that? Depends on what kind of hotel it was. You know, if it's five star, he's in and out as far as I'm concerned. Fifthly, oh my gosh, I find this so difficult.
[22:36] Do you? You must avoid hasty judgments. You know, I'm a kind of, if I was a pan, I'd be quick to the boil.

And as dogmy all my life, make it, you know, there are people with needs who instinctively I want to avoid. You know, I have a cleanliness obsession, so, you know, it's really difficult when somebody who smells really bad and is not shaved and got scum around their mouth.
And when they come to me and, you know, want me to hug them, I'm like, ooh, you know. And what would Jesus do? Huh? What would Jesus do?
So, I want to encourage you. If you think about how many people are out this morning, maybe 70 of you, right? Just suppose we agree together that we'll try and improve the care capacity of this church by 5% this week.
Is there anything you could do to add to that 5%? I'm talking to some people who, you know, as far as I can see, I've got a PhD in caring anyway. I'm just wondering if we could raise it 5%.
[24:08] Maybe that would mean picking up the telephone and talking to somebody who either you've had a bit of a tiff with or maybe somebody you know suffers from aching loneliness. Or

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

maybe somebody, do you have people in your life you know you should have been in touch with, but it's kind of gone on a bit long and you, you know, you're like, what will happen if I...

phone her. Maybe it would mean writing somebody a card. I mean, unless you can't write, we could all do that. Maybe it would mean baking somebody a cake and taking it round.
You know, I love this about one of my daughters goes to a church in Newbury when she had a baby. It was all a bit... got a bit complicated. And that church supplied a meal every night for a month.
I was like, we need to join that church. We developed this thing in my diocese that if we had somebody who was long-term sick or had a spouse who was long-term sick, we'd give them 200 quid's worth of cook tokens.
You know what cook is? It's a really, like, posh food shop. No, it's not like a chipper yet. And they do...
[25:28] They've got chefs who prepare amazing food and all you need to do is heat it up. You have no idea what that small act of kindness did for people who are going through a tough time.

And we should be looking for those people who are in need. You know, I was taught in college that my neighbor is the person around me in need.
And we live in Cleveland. I love living in Cleveland. I've lived in a lot of places in my life. I have never loved living in a place like I like living in Cleveland.
Someone say amen. I love it here. But there's quite a bit of need around, especially down our end of town, down the hill.
You think that just by doing some small, menial act of kindness this week, that we could lift the care potential of this church by 5%.
[26:38] I think you could do this. I really do. And I, you know, I've got no way of checking up whether you did.

But just think, the care potential of the church, which is already pretty good, I would say, but improved by 5%. Maybe you need to go volunteer for something.
You know, somebody, I think it was, I'm sure she's here today, Jean's not here. She sent a thing around saying they need volunteers in the school. I can't remember what it was for, but one morning a week.
Could give that a shot. This love thing gets very complicated. If you think that love and intimacy and all this stuff can only be encompassed within physical love and champagne and roses love, you're going to live your life in a very disappointed way because life ain't like that forever.
And that's why persistence is important. And if you persist in acts of kindness, there's even brain chemistry that demonstrates this, you will have a more fulfilled life and you will have a more fruitful life.
[28:14] I was in Sainsbury's in Clifton Down one day and I was doing my usual impatient thing. I thought I'd join the shortest queue.

And the guy at the front of the queue, some old guy, you know, it's like, does he think this is a personal counselling service here? You know, he's talking away there and girls talking back to him, talking back to him.
I was just about to leave the queue. There's an old lady in front of me, never forgotten this. And she clearly was a person who lived on her own and she got a couple of carrots and a chop and a small amount of vegetables, a couple of potatoes.
She gets to the front of the line. By this time, I'm like, losing the will to live. She pulls out of her purse the oldest ten pound note I've ever seen.
She hands it to the girl in the check-in. Lady says, you don't have to pay. She's like, yeah, but I want to take this home.
[29:26] She's like, no, you don't have to pay. She's like, well, why not? She said, because the gentleman in front of you has paid for your shopping. He disappeared. In a moment, I had a fresh understanding of what grace is.

God's love shone when the person who receives it has done nothing to earn it. And I thought about my previous behavior.
Just get out of here. You know, I've got a life to live. What's wrong with you? And I learned something. And I think it changed me.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host

Not enough, but it changed me. You start doing these menial, undramatic acts of love, and you start to be changed by the God who loved you enough to send his son to a painful death on a cross so that you could know forgiveness and you could be healed and your flaws could start to be put right. You know what? I'm really optimistic about this message because I think you could do this. And even though your body language might be indicating something different, I think you would like to do this and you would like to be transformed with the hope that your little effort might transform others.
[31:16] See, the great thing about this agape love is it spills over. If we just trapped it in the four walls of the church, that would be good, but it wouldn't be good enough.

God so loved what? The? The world. And he calls us to love it with that agape love. Come on. Let's get the heck out of here and do it.
In the name of Jesus and the people who agreed, said together. Amen.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host