



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Love, A Good Choice

SCRIPTURE:  
1 Corinthians  
13:1-8a,  
Luke 14:12-14

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October 23, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**R**einhold Niebuhr was a pastor who served a working-class congregation in Detroit during the 1920s. Most of his congregation worked for Henry Ford. There he had a front-row seat to the benefits, but also the abuses of industrial capitalism. As with every pastor, his pastoral experience shaped his theology. He would become a thinker who shaped 20th century American Protestantism. He left Detroit to teach ethics at Union Seminary in New York, which he did for more than 30 years. He spoke to the intersection of morality and politics—developing a theological vision called Christian Realism. In 1964, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

In 1952, he published a book, “The Irony of American History.” In that writing, he said, “Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.” Love, in Christian theology, is not limited to what we feel. As Paul says, “Love is patient and kind and not arrogant.” Those aren’t feelings; they are choices. We choose patience, for example, when what we are most likely feeling is impatient. Love is more than how we feel about one another; it is how we treat one another. And it is a power. It is a vulnerable power; it is a fragile strength. But it is the power that draws us together to do the good that is ours to do.

This is our stewardship season and in a very practical way, stewardship is the church living our faith together. It empowers us with the ability to love one another and the world. Living our faith is something we do together. That’s because faith, as Niebuhr says, is a life of love. And it is that love that saves us.

Now, everyone loves. Christians hold no monopoly on love. But there is a particular way of loving that is revealed in the life of Christ. In this room, we proclaim that everyone is worthy of love. The basis

for love of neighbor is simply that every neighbor is a child of God. We can say that without raised eyebrows in this room. But what happens when we go outside? Is there a different ethos in the culture when it comes to determining who is worthy of love?

Jesus said so. He said when you host a dinner, don’t invite the important people, the famous people, the glitterati. Invite folks who need to eat.

We want to remember that in Jesus’ day, when you gave a great dinner, you made sure that you invited people who were worthy of your dinner. You made sure you invited people who, well, who might invite you to their great dinner someday. In part, it was status. You know, days later at the office you could let drop, “We had an elder at the synagogue over to our house for dinner. Nothing fancy. Just fish on the grill.” “Oh, that must have been fun,” says another. “We had the priest over. Very enriching time.” “Is that right?” says another. “We had the chief priest for dinner. It was time; we hadn’t dined at his house since last summer.”

It was about status. Sort of an unending Greek rush week. But more than that, dining in Jesus’ day was about reciprocity. I invite you to lunch because I know you can invite me to lunch. To put it plainly: I love those who can benefit me. You befriend those who make your life better; those are the ones worthy of love.

I think we all do that. Last Sunday we spoke of friendship, and said, in friendship, we bear one another’s burdens. Which means sometimes you are the one who helps and sometimes you are the one who needs help. It’s an ethic of reciprocity. We love those who make our lives better.

An evangelist for this kind of love was Ayn Rand. She was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1905. In 1917 as the Russian revolution was taking place,

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Rand's family lost their business and fled to Crimea. In the mid-1920s, they immigrated to the United States, and like many immigrants, they stayed.

She moved to Hollywood and met Cecil B. DeMille and got a part in his movie, "King of Kings." It was not her acting, but her writing that pushed her into the American conversation. In 1943, she published "The Fountainhead," a novel about her ideal man, Howard Roark. In 1957, she published "Atlas Shrugged." Both novels celebrate Rand's conviction that the individual is most alive when unencumbered by obligation to the community. Her fiction was a platform for her philosophy, which she called objectivism. She came to understand love as means to build a meaningful life.

We should not, Rand argues, offer love to those who do not deserve it. We love people because we value them. We love people because they have something to offer us. I give you something; you give me something. It's an ethic of reciprocity.

In his book, "Illusive Grace," my friend Rev. Scott Black Johnston says, "Rand is right about something. The human heart is always calculating whether our relationships benefit us, whether they are good for us." It is natural to want to maximize our happiness and for our relationships to be a means to do so.<sup>1</sup>

If you have a friend and you take your friend to lunch and the check comes and you say, "I've got it," it's generous. But you might notice if you went to lunch and every time your friend got 'alligator arms' and never offered to pick up the tab. There is a degree of reciprocity in every friendship. As Paul says: Bear one another's burdens. That means sometimes you help, but sometimes you are helped. Reciprocity. It's what Rand advocated.

My friend Scott says, "It is unnatural for us to see our neighbor as worthy of love regardless of whether they can do something for you."<sup>2</sup> But then Scott asks, "What happens when the urge in us for reciprocity becomes glorified as Ayn Rand does?" Is there reason to love our neighbor if our neighbor cannot do something for us in return? Jesus says yes.

Jesus says: Sometimes you need to love not because of what it does for you, but for what it does for the one you love. And maybe even for love itself. When you host a dinner, he says, invite the people who need to eat. Sometimes we need to love the neighbor not because we value what they do for us but because we value what love can do. Jesus calls us to love not simply because of what love can do for us (it does matter to us), but because love has the power to save.

When our children were small, a favorite part of the day was reading books at bedtime. And a favorite book was titled "Love You Forever."<sup>3</sup> It reads:

*A mother held her new baby and very slowly rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she held him, she sang:*

*I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.*

*The baby grew. He grew and he grew and he grew. He grew until he was two years old, and he ran all around the house. He pulled all the books off the shelves. He pulled all the food out of the refrigerator and he took his mother's watch and flushed it down the toilet. Sometimes his mother would say, "This kid is driving me CRAZY!"*

*But at nighttime, when that two-year-old was quiet, she opened the door to his room, crawled across the floor, looked up over the side of his bed; and if he was really asleep, she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. While she rocked him, she sang:*

*I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.*

*The little boy grew. He grew to be a nine-year-old where he didn't want to take a bath. He grew to be a teenager. He listened to strange music. He grew until he was a grown-up man. He left home and got a house across town. But no matter how old he got, at nighttime*

1 Scott Black Johnston, *Illusive Grace* (2022) p. 89. Much of this section on Ayn Rand is informed by Scott's chapter, "Learning to Love Your Neighbor."

2 Johnston, p. 89.

3 Robert Munsch, *Love You Forever* (1986).

she would open the door, crawl across the floor, and if he was really asleep, she picked him up and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while she rocked him she sang:

*I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.*

Well as the story goes, that mother, she got older. One day she called her son and said, "You'd better come see me because I'm very old and sick." So her son came to see her. When he came in the door, she tried to sing the song. But she couldn't finish because she was too old and sick. The son went to his mother. He picked her up and rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And he sang this song:

*I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my Mommy you'll be.*

When the son came home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then he went into the room where his very new baby daughter was sleeping. He picked her up in his arms and very slowly rocked her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And while he rocked her, he sang:

*I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living  
my baby you'll be.*

Now I take the time to share some bedtime reading with you because this story bears witness to what happens when we love for love's sake. I know: Parental love is almost never completely sacrificial. Loving children is a profound source of joy. It can drive you crazy sometimes, particularly in those days when you can't tell if they are going to grow up to be an attorney or just grow up to need one. And yet, it is a source of deep joy.

But the story points to something else that I think Jesus saw. Mom loves because she wants her son not just to grow to be big, but to grow to be good. To become a man who loves. And the way to become one who loves is to be loved.

Jesus says love is what saves this world. So, love those who can't pay you back. Love because love has the power to spread love. Love has the power to change us and all. Oh, it's not mechanical. But it is the power that saves us, and by the grace of God, love begets love, begets love, begets love, begets love. And that is the good that is ours to do.