Sunday, November 14, 1976
THE INCONVENIENCE OF LOVE
Luke 10:25-37

Usually when we think of the word “love,” we think of it in intimate personal terms. We know the good feelings of having a person love us and of being in love with someone. In our day-to-day life, in books, magazines, TV and movies, love is most often portrayed as something totally convenient, requiring few demands and something that pays direct dividends to the one who loves.

Thus, love is usually thought of as a relationship of personal intimacy between two persons. Certainly, Christian love, love of neighbor, as Christ defined it does have this aspect to it. Love is often quite personal and intimate.

But the Christian faith and the Bible also show another element of love, an element we do not hear too much about and which we like to gloss over and not mention. That side of love is most clearly illustrated in our scripture lesson for this morning. Here’s what happened!

A lawyer put a question to Jesus to test him — “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer knew the right answer, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “That’s right,” Jesus said, “Do this and you will live.” But the lawyer wanted to press the issue further and he asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

Did neighbor mean only another Jew, or another Jew under certain conditions? Was an extortionist like Zacchaeus a neighbor who was to be loved? Was a leper to be loved? What about someone of another race or nationality? What about people we don’t like or who are a nuisance to us? Where does one draw the line in this neighbor business? What if it is inconvenient to practice love?

It was at this point that Jesus told a story. “A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho... and he fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him and departed leaving him half dead. A priest came along and when he saw the rr1an in the ditch, he acted as if he didn’t see the injured man and walked as far on the other side of the road as possible. Why should he get involved? It wasn’t convenient to help him. He was in a hurry. His schedule couldn’t be interrupted. And anyway, he didn’t know the person. Later a Levite came down the same road and he too acted as if he didn’t see the man in the ditch. But a Samaritan, an outsider, when he saw the man, came to his aid.”

The story describes who our neighbors are and also gives another dimension to the practice of love. Jesus was saying to the lawyer and to us, “your neighbor is any person in need, whether or not you know the person or like him or her. There are no limits to neighborliness.”

In addition to telling us who our neighbors are, the parable also tells us something important about the nature and scope of love.

1. In the first place. note that love is not always necessarily personal. Love is more than being kind or helpful to those we know personally. The New Testament repeatedly describes “love of neighbor” as a readiness to serve others in their particular situation; a readiness to help them

with their particular problems. And there is no hint that only persons resources should be used, or that we have to have some kind of interpersonal relationship or “I — Thou encounter.” The Samaritan did what needed to be done. He gave first aid and then took the man to the next town, saw that he was taken care of, and then went on his way. He probably didn’t even learn the man’s name.

Sometimes we are called to practice love at a distance. For example, there is as much love being practiced if a person uses his or her skills to work at providing jobs for the unemployed as there is in bringing baskets of food to a family who is hungry because the father or mother is unemployed. Working to provide jobs may not bring me into some kind of direct or intimate personal relationship with the person who is hungry — I may never even see the persons I helped to get employment — but it is still the practice of Christian love.

Another example — this congregation has a good record of letting this building be used for all kinds of positive purposes. That is a practice of Christian love even though many of us may never come into personal contact with many of those the building serves.

Love is too narrowly defined if we think of it only in terms of one person doing something directly for another. We can practice love in many ways — working for better street lighting so that all people are safer a night; working for a more just society so that all persons receive justice equally. The hospital worker whose job it is to antiseptically clean the rooms to prevent the spread of infection can be practicing Christian love as much as the surgeon who comes into direct contact with the patient.

2. Note secondly, that Christian love does not ask whether or not the person or persons in need deserve help. The Samaritan did not first question the man in the ditch to determine if he was of the Samaritan’s time. For worthy love to be love means it is freely given without regard for the merit of the person receiving it or without any expectation of a return on our love of any kind. Just as God’s love is freely given to all who would accept it, so is our love to be the same.

3. Note thirdly, that loving in the Christian way means doing what needs to be done whether or not one personally likes those who need the help or not.

In the parable, Jesus purposely used the image of a Samaritan as the one who helped the man in the ditch. We can assume the injured man was a Jew. Jews and Samaritans usually had nothing to do with each other. They avoided each other if at all possible. But here that’s beside the point. A person needs help and help is given. So too we are often called upon to help those we may not like or who are totally different from us. But God is not calling us to personally like those who need our help-- God asks us to treat them with respect and justice and see that they get the help they need.

4. Note in the fourth place, that all of this means that our loving may often be quite inconvenient. Certainly, it was inconvenient for the Samaritan to stop and help a Jew who was hurt. Furthermore, it was dangerous. Maybe there were other robbers lurking and waiting.

To be loving is often inconvenient — -for us and for others. Persons who are in love with one another and are thinking about marriage need to be told that love in marriage is sometim.es inconvenient — not to scare them out of marriage, but to let them know what true love is all about.

The marriage vows say that each person is to love and sustain the other, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health...the vows take into account the inconvenience of love. When one partner is required to take care of the other for many years because of sickness, then love is at times very inconvenient.

In a similar way, our love for our children can be very inconvenient. Once children are a part of the family, we cannot drop the dishes in the sink and run off to a movie. Our children often get in the way, cause fatigue, make demands which are difficult to meet. They cause us to be deprived of some of our freedom.

Sometimes in our demands on our children and theirs on us and sometimes in our marriages, what we are really saying is, “I want my love for you to be more convenient for me. I resent the inconvenience, the responsibility. Make it more convenient for me to love you.”

Sometimes too with our institutions, like the church, our practice of love causes inconvenience for us who are members. We were talking about this a few weeks ago in the Board of Trustees meeting. As some of you know our church for the past several years has been the place which houses a “Day Care Center.” Having 25 little children in the building is an inconvenience at times, particularly at mealtimes when the large kitchen needs to be used. Children tend to make a mess wherever they are. Yet these children need a place to be cared for while their parents are in class at the University. We are meeting a legitimate need and thereby practicing the same love of neighbor as the Good Samaritan. It is however sometimes downright inconvenient — but that’s the way love is at times no matter where we are.

Recently I heard the story of a Rabbi who was called to a circuit riding ministry in the State of North Carolina. There were some three hundred persons of the Jewish faith scattered across the southeastern part of that state but no synagogue. The Rabbi moved into a little town called Whiteville because it was the center of his extensive parish. It was a happy choice. The people of Whiteville found him a welcome addition to their community. He was open and friendly, and they responded with a warmth of their own. His unmarried sister kept house for him, and he very quickly adapted himself to the life of the small southern town.

The Rabbi wrote a column for the town newspaper which came out twice a week. He spoke regularly on the local radio station. Occasionally he would occupy the pulpit for one of his Protestant colleagues on Brotherhood Sunday. He even became the Police chaplain. They had a special badge made, a six-pointed Star of David, and pinned it on him and made him an honorary police chief.

The Rabbi seemed to have his niche in the community. It was all so beautiful. He fell in love with it. He said, “I really felt the people loved me.”

One of the needs of the community that had become apparent to him was some kind of youth center — a place where young people could get together. He succeeded in getting a $5000 grant from the County Commissioners with which he rented a frame house on a residential street and opened what was called THE COLUMBUS COUNTY COMMUNITY CENTER, or more familiarly, the FOUR C’s. It was a typical youth center. There was a basketball court outside. There was a game room with a juke box and coke bar. All teenagers were welcome regardless of race or religion.

From time to time there were people who said things about the center which made it clear that they did not approve of it. It was causing some inconvenience, in spite of the good it was doing. But nobody burned crosses in the Rabbi's yard.

After about two months, the picture began to change. Suddenly a very strong opposition to the Community Center began to emerge. The chief instigator, I am sorry to say, was a Protestant minister whose last name ironically was Love. He made an appearance with other protesters at a meeting of the Board of Directors. He said the center had become a public nuisance and should be padlocked. The main charges he brought against it were reports of youngsters drinking outside the center, and rumors that drugs had been used — charges which were denied by the police. However, the main problem as far as the Rev. Mr. Love was concerned was sex. He apparently had seen young people with their arms around each other — right out there in the open where there was plenty of light for everyone to see.

There were other people who had objections. Sometimes the center was open at night; this caused some extra noise. By the time it was all over, the project was pretty much doomed. The man who owned the building would not renew the lease. He was afraid of controversy and criticism. The Rabbi made a plea for funds to rent or build another building, but it was in vain. He finally gave up. It almost seemed as if those who opposed the Community Center would rather have the young people doing things secretly in dark places than have them gather together for fun and recreation in town because that was too inconvenient. It was all right to practice love as long as it didn't become inconvenient.

Sometimes we also forget that loving has its inconvenient side. Christ loved us and the world, and it cost him his life. However, the Christian faith calls us to practice the kind of love that the Samaritan practiced in spite of its inconvenience to us and to others. We are not to be surprised at the risk and sacrifice and nuisance which the practice of love often entails.

The fact is that when we love fully and openly and without fear of the inconvenience, God, through His Spirit gives us the power to accept and love even the unacceptable. If we open ourselves to it, God takes our puny and selfish love and works through it to transform even the inconvenience of it into something more powerful than anything in the world. Thus, as Christians we can accept the inconvenience of love and not be afraid of it. As a Christian congregation we too can accept the inconvenience of some of our programs and the inconvenience that some of the building use causes us. We accept it and live with it because through it all we know we are practicing the love of neighbor as God calls us to do. Amen.