



Northwestern Ohio Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

THE WAY OF LOVE

2026

MONTHLY
DEVOTIONALS

W E L C O M E !

Welcome to **2026: The Way of Love!** As our scripture verse for this year reminds us, **“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19).** As we journey together with Jesus, we have the great opportunity to encourage each other to grow in both our appreciation for, and reflection of, the love of God.

What follows is a 12-session collection of devotions written by leaders from across Northwestern Ohio. These 15 to 20 minute devotions are ideal for when church council gathers, when committees or staff meet, or for use at any regular gathering.

Each devotional highlights one of the questions addressed by the twelve chapters of our Book of the Year, ***Love is the Way: Holding on the Hope in Troubling Times*** by Bishop Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. In these devotionals, the authors from Northwestern Ohio share their own reflections and perspectives on these questions, and we hope they will prompt good conversation among companions who spend time pondering together. Each monthly devotion follows a simple rhythm: a scripture reading around which the author has chosen to reflect, a story, two discussion questions and a closing prayer.

May you know and grow in the love of God in this year and beyond.



WHAT IS LOVE?

BISHOP DANIEL BEAUDOIN

“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

What is Love? Love is a gift from God that calls us to imitate the self-giving love of Jesus, which transforms us, to transform the community and the world!

In July, 2000, I was blessed to gather with over 35,000 young people for the ELCA Youth Gathering in St. Louis, Missouri. One of the main speakers was Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. It was at this gathering where I first heard about the South African principle of "Ubuntu" which is translated, "I am because we are." Archbishop Tutu taught us that when the love of God is combined with the power of "we," the result is the healing and transformation of the community and the world.

The Apostle John understands both the gift of God's love and the power of "we". In 1 John 4:7-19, John teaches the community of faith that God is love, and as followers of Jesus we are called to imitate God's self-giving love, not only as individuals, but also as a community of faith. Notice that 1 John 4:19, does not begin with a "me", but with a "we". "We" are called to love, in the same way that God, in Christ Jesus, loves us. The love that John writes about is a love that begins with God, a love that we are called to imitate: a love that changes the community and the world.

In his book, *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, helps us to put God's self-giving love into perspective. He simply asks, "Is this love about me, or is it about we?" Does the decision that I am about to make serve my own self-interest, or might this decision serve the greater good? If the answer is "me, myself, and I," the way of love calls us to reconsider our next step. According to Presiding Bishop Curry, Archbishop Tutu, the Apostle John, and Jesus, we embrace the "we" before the "me," for that is the way of love. And it can be that simple... and also that challenging. But at the end of the day, love is the only way. "We love because He first loved us".

1. In 1 John 4:7-19, the writer reminds the church about the self-giving love of God. How is this self-giving love lived out in your community of faith? Please share some examples.
2. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Apostle John, and Jesus all call us to a love that puts the "we" before the "me". Why do you think this self-giving love is so challenging for us to live out? Can you share a story of a time you experienced this kind of love in your life? In the life of your parish?

Let us pray: Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the gift of Your love, and we seek Your forgiveness, when we fail to love as we are loved. Fill us with Your gentle and self-giving love, so that we might share it with others. Empower us to forgive, to serve, and to follow you in the way of love. Lead us to share Your love with our neighbor and the world, transforming us from who we are, into the people You long for us to be. In the name of Jesus, crucified and risen for the world. Amen.

Bishop Daniel Beaudoin is a Minister of Word and Sacrament, serving the people of God of Northwestern Ohio as Bishop of the Northwestern Ohio Synod.

HOW DO I FIND GOD'S LOVE? PASTOR NATE TUFF

"I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you." (Psalm 32:8)

Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed tells me that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with her gifts and sanctified me and kept me in the one true faith.

My life has fallen into the pattern of getting lost. As a 65-year-old person with Alzheimer's I am increasingly dependent on Air Tags, GPS, and the lovely kindness of strangers.

But, as my physical world is getting smaller, my spiritual world is dramatically expanding. I am so thankful for having been steeped in being Lutheran since the moment of my birth. Out of necessity I am learning new ways to trust in God's grace. I am learning a radical and complete dependence on God who at every moment knows exactly where I am, in body, mind, and spirit.

God knows where I am, always. God knows where and who I am when my medications cause me to hallucinate at night. Beautiful dragon-like friends come to my bedroom window and keep me company. God knows where and who I am; God gives me friends and family who calm and bless me. I have learned to trust that God is present with those whom I love. I see God's love through them. I have learned to trust medical professionals who care for me and advocate for me and offer guidance by cutting through the complex medical industrial complex. God's love is evident through them.

Flashes of anger and self-pity dissolve quickly when I remember what I have learned and embraced as a follower of Jesus. Jesus' love finds me, holds me, comforts me, and has provided a place for me among my community here, and for eternity in his presence. My diminishing capacities do not keep me from God but show me God's tenacity and determination to bless and sustain me.

It is liberating and fills me with joy to have been found at every moment by God's love. Praise Jesus that I am found, and that you are found too.

My friends in Christ, God bless your ministry, given to you by Jesus, and upheld by the Holy Spirit.

1. Describe a time that God's love accidentally found you.
2. How might you grow your openness to God's love that has found you?

Dear Jesus, I trust that you will not forget me, and that at every moment I am in your loving care. Help me to live in response to your love and in participation in your love. Daily renew my capacity to share your love boldly. Walk with me when sharing is challenging. Fill me with the joy of your love, justice and mercy. In your precious and holy name, I pray. Amen.

Pastor Nathan Tuff is a retired Minister of Word and Sacrament. He continues to mentor colleagues and care for the pastors and lay leaders of the Northwestern Ohio Synod.

HOW DO I FIND THE ENERGY TO KEEP LOVING WHEN THE WORLD SEEMS TO BE GOING THE OTHER WAY?

PASTOR MIKE POOLE

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

In this passage of scripture, Jesus tells people their behavior with others is also how Jesus sees that they treat him. Jesus states that what they do—or don't do—to others, they do to him. The examples that Jesus lifts up depict moments when people are in vulnerable situations. The response given by the righteous in the story is that "We didn't know it was you and you were vulnerable".

Prior to ordained ministry, I spent a career in law enforcement. The majority of the time I was present with people was not in joyful moments. People would treat me negatively, even though my intent was to make the best out of the situation. Sometimes those encounters would be violent. I didn't feel much love from the public during those twenty years. I would be asked how I could deal with such experiences without giving in to hate, retribution, vengeance. For me, it was seeing Christ in the eyes of everyone I encountered. Regardless of what they were saying, what they were doing or how they were responding, I needed to see them as Christ. That's not easy. I had to be secure enough in myself and my faith to stand in the midst of it all (many times taking it all) and respond in a manner that is acceptable to Christ. Even in those few moments where someone pointed a firearm at me—and me at them—I needed to see Christ in their eyes.

What helped me stay grounded is this passage from Matthew. I truly did not know what was going on in the life of each individual that brought them to these moments. I didn't know just how vulnerable they were in these moments. I needed to listen to their story to have a better

understanding of these moments. I would need to constantly remind myself that what I did (or didn't) do to them, I was doing to Christ.

We are called to encounter our world the same way today. Every person I encounter in the world has vulnerabilities that I probably don't know. I am unaware of how they are doing and what they need. The world does not appear to be a loving place right now. But we can change that with our love. It changes with each encounter that faithful people have with others, seeing Christ in each other. The world changes by measures of one encounter, one moment, one loving action at a time. With this approach, I find that love is reflected back to me, when I am vulnerable, when my story is unknown or when I just need a stranger to love me.

1. What obstacles stand in our way of seeing Christ in every person we encounter?
2. What experiences do you have of someone seeing Christ in you?

Almighty God, You place us in this world to be in connection with one another. Send the Holy Spirit into our midst, that we might be inspired to walk into vulnerable places to listen to everyone's story and to respond with love. Empower us to see Christ in everyone we encounter. May our actions change the world and move it closer to a living reflection of Your Kingdom of love. Amen.

Pastor Mike Poole is a Minister of Word and Sacrament serving the people of God at Emanuel Lutheran Church in Marion, Ohio. He is also the founder of Earth and Cup, where he walks with people in pursuit of spiritual and physical wellness.

CAN LOVE REALLY CHANGE THE WORLD?

SARAH NEAL

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12: 9-10)

We all have experienced "count downs" to something - A birthday, graduation, a new Bible study or a long- awaited vacation. Right now, I'm counting down to something deeply personal: a mission trip to Kashasha, Tanzania. By the time you read this, I'll have already been there. Please look me up - I'd love to tell you all about the adventure!

I can already imagine it: moving bricks, clearing brush, painting a newly renovated school. I can see the smiling faces from all the photos and videos - faces that I've grown to love even before meeting them in person.

One story that stays with me is about a little girl whose face lit up when she tasted porridge with a side of beans for the first time. She exclaimed, "yum, yum! This is good!" (She really loved those beans!) What joy in something so simple. This story was shared by Wellington and Moja, a couple from Africa who came to the United States for about 40 years and have now moved back to Wellington's home village, Kashasha. They have done so much to help those in the village but without changing the people that live there. We need to remember; we're not there to change or "fix" anyone: they are not broken. We are there to help with what is truly needed like clean water and learning to grow their own food.

Now the children proudly bring their water jugs to school for clean water which is available. I've heard that school attendance is higher than ever - all because of something as basic as water, food, and the love of learning.

Over the years, I've been part of many projects that feed people, but this one feels different. This is where I've found love - in people half a world away.

Why does God keep leading me to those who need to be fed? I believe it's because He knows it fills me with love - not just to feed bodies, but to nourish hearts with love and friendship. God is always inviting us into deeper relationships - with Him and with others.

The question is: are we listening? As my husband likes to say, we need to keep our "antenna up," and be ready to hear when God is speaking.

1. Where has God directed you to share His love?
2. Is there something about God's love in your life that just won't let you sit still? (I know there is in mine!)

Lord Jesus, thank You for inviting us into Your love story - one that reaches across oceans, cultures, and hearts. Help us to recognize Your call to love others, even when it requires us to step outside our comfort zones. Fill us with Your patience, Your kindness, and Your compassion, so that others may see You in us. In Your holy name we pray, Amen

Sarah Neal is a lay leader at St. Mark's Lutheran Church and Academy in Bowling Green, Ohio. She is currently a student in the Growing in Faith: Diakonia program.

WON'T LOVING EVERYBODY MAKE ME A DOORMAT?

MEGAN O'BRIEN

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 34-35)

I'll never forget the lessons I learned from leading my first fundraiser. As a first-year teacher, a student in my fourth-grade class (let's call him "George") accidentally flushed his hearing aid down the toilet. Not wanting George to fall behind, I organized a donut sale at church, collected just enough money for the replacement, and proudly handed a check directly to George's family. But George never got a new hearing aid.

Whenever the question is asked, "Won't loving everybody make me a doormat?" I think of what I learned from that attempt to help George. I'm sad that he never received the new hearing aid, but I also know that his family was facing numerous hardships. I will never know how that money was spent, but I like to think it was life-giving to George's family in some other way.

While we can be wise and responsible stewards of our gifts, we cannot ultimately control what the receiver does with what we give. But does that make the gift any less worthy? If people don't use what we give in the way we had hoped, does that mean we should stop giving? Twenty-five years later, there are certainly things I would do differently—but I would still want to help George. Because being a disciple isn't about judging how people use the gifts we give them. It's about loving them anyway.

1. Who are the "Georges" in your community?
2. How can we show love to people even when we don't agree with the choices they've made?

Loving God, You teach us to love one another—not as a suggestion, but as a command.
You give, even when You know we might waste the gift.
Teach me to love like that.

Give me a heart that is generous, not just with money, but with grace.

Remind me that loving others does not make me a doormat—it makes me a disciple.

Lord, I lift up the "Georges" in my community—

Those who are in need,

Those I don't fully understand,

And even those whose choices I struggle with.

May I see them the way You see me:

With mercy, compassion, and love.

In Your name, Amen.

Megan O'Brien is a lay leader at St. John Lutheran Church in Williston, Ohio. She serves as the Vice President of Luther Home of Mercy, a social service organization dedicated to helping adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities live as they choose.

I'M JUST A REGULAR PERSON; CAN MY LOVE HAVE AN IMPACT?

DAVE WACHTMAN

"An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "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." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." (Luke 10: 25 – 28)

Love is no doubt the greatest commandment. And love is the driving force behind our actions. Our reading from Luke is the precursor to the beloved parable "The Good Samaritan." In this parable, Jesus tells of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho who is attacked by robbers, beaten, stripped of his clothes, and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by, neither of whom offer the poor man any help. However, a Samaritan—a regular person typically viewed with disdain by the community—has compassion, and stops to offer him help. He bandages the man's wounds, places him on his own donkey and brings him to an inn. The Samaritan pays for the man's care and promises that he will return and pay for any additional costs. At the end of this parable, Jesus asked the lawyer, "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among thieves?" And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The Bible teaches us that love is patient, kind, and sacrificial. It moves us to act for the wellbeing of others. When we share genuine love with those in our lives, we can significantly touch someone's heart and encourage them on their journey. But, let's face it, sometimes that is easier said than done. Sometimes we may feel inadequate, uncertain that we can make a difference. Sometimes we may even ask ourselves, "I'm just a regular person; can my love have an impact?"

I have personally struggled with this feeling of inadequacy throughout my adult life. While I was still in high school, I felt God calling me to enter ministry. But I didn't know if I had what it took to be a minister. I didn't know if I had what it took to make a difference, to make a real impact. Besides, I was shy and quiet. Standing in front of a congregation would definitely push me well outside my comfort zone. So, I decided to ignore the call into ministry. Many times I thought to myself that had I received a nickel's worth of encouragement, maybe I would have explored that path. But because I didn't share my feeling of being called with anyone, I didn't receive any encouragement (at least not then), and so I chose a different direction.

Many years passed by, and that feeling of God calling me to ministry continued. And not only continued, but became stronger and stronger. And at some point, I knew that I needed to stop and to listen to Him. So, I met with my pastor and shared that I felt God tugging at me, wanting me to serve in some capacity. After several lengthy discussions, he suggested that I lead a Sunday worship service just to get a sense of where God might be leading me. And so, I did. And that is all it took! I knew then that God had a plan for me, and that plan was to serve as a lay minister. All of those thoughts of inadequacy and uncertainty suddenly disappeared. That first time leading a Sunday worship service was almost twenty years ago, and I have been very blessed to have been given the opportunity to serve as a lay minister on many

occasions since. This past Fall I received my Invitation to Service as a Synod Authorized Minister (SAM). I find it very humbling to serve in this capacity, and I am very grateful for the opportunity God has given me. He has proven to me that even as a regular person my love can have an impact!

Let's face it, we all have challenges and moments of uncertainty in life. But, as believers, we have the opportunity to be beacons of love and hope to those struggling around us. The Scriptures encourage us to uplift others, to help them find strength and encouragement in difficult times. Driven by love, when we share our faith and personal testimonies, we can impact others positively and demonstrate the unshakeable love and hope found only in Jesus Christ. Through our words and by our actions, we can remind others that they are not alone—that someone is there for them, to care for them, to love them, and to give them hope. Whether through acts of kindness, by offering encouragement or by serving, we have unlimited opportunities to spread love and hope to those we encounter. As we move forward, may we remember that impacting others is more than a privilege, it is a calling from Jesus. So, let's commit to living a life with purpose, creating a loving and compassionate environment that reflects the heart of Jesus. We can change the world, one loving act at a time.

1. As individuals, how might we intentionally seek to share Christ's love with our neighbors in an impactful and meaningful way?
2. As a congregation, how might we intentionally seek to proclaim the love of Christ in our community in an impactful and meaningful way?

Heavenly Father, You have commanded that we love You with all of our being, and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Encourage us to act on Your will and to seek opportunities to share Your love with those we meet. Help us to exemplify the kindness and patience of Jesus in all our interactions, that through our words and actions we might significantly touch the hearts of others. This we ask in the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Dave Wachtman is a Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) serving the people of God at St. Mark's and Bethlehem parishes in Defiance, Ohio.

I'M TOLD TO LOVE MY NEIGHBOR, BUT WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

TINA SPROUSE, TRINA SMITH
& PASTOR MIKE HANCK

"And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:39)

Tina: "Loving thy neighbor" can and will be hard to learn. Most of our Vistula neighbors only know how to survive and make it alone. The command in Mathew 22:39 to "love thy neighbor as thyself" is very a hard command in this society when you are unsure of who your neighbors really are. Are they helping like me? Are they going to be there when I'm in need? At Salem, we form bonds with our family (neighbors) and love them like no other. Love can have a different meaning to each and every one of us, and that's okay. But what does love mean to you? What does Neighbor mean to you?

Pastor Mike: According to Martin Luther, one of our realities as human beings in the world is that our self is often "curved in on itself." We as people often use even spiritual and good things to serve our own interests. Recently, someone sent a message inquiring about my favorite coffee to reward me for all my work. It's a tempting offer, but in reflecting on it, I came up with alternatives. What about a coffee event for affordable housing residents? Maybe it'd be best to present this option, and it could serve as a better tribute - it would involve others, including our neighbors experiencing acute economic need. We all know, all too well for our own good, the answer to "Who is my neighbor?" We're not dummkopfs; we've heard the parable of the Good Samaritan before. The trouble is, even for the best of us, that it is not easy nor our natural inclination to more fully consider our neighbors. Perhaps then it is good to stay skeptical of knowing the answer, to keep asking related questions. How do I really love my neighbor? How deep and comprehensively do I feel and show that love? Is it substantive or performative?

Trina: A wonderful person I work with said it best: "Food is a Human Right." Those four powerful words should always be used to remember why we do what we do. And that is why I love doing what I do. I love seeing neighbors we regularly help with smiles on their faces. Every Tuesday, we share food with over 300 people of all different types, and we know the meal we give them keeps them from going hungry for that night. So, when someone comes in for the resource table with Tina or to shop the Free Store, God guides us to help God's children: our neighbors. God leads us to hear the cries of our community to help those who don't often feel heard. God hears their cries, and leads us to help smooth those tears away. Helping neighbors means being a listening ear, showing love and support, and sometimes some tough love too. It helps neighbors to get the things they need in their lives.

1. Do I listen to my neighbors and share experiences with them as a witness while I attempt to love them?
2. Is our love performative and self-focused and self-righteous, or is it comprehensive, deep, substantive, and open?

The Lord be with you!

Generous God, day by day, you shower us with your grace, mercy, and love, but the strongest of these is love. Help us to unfurl and uncurl our love, to move it from pointing back at ourselves to a path that moves alongside of others. Teach us, perhaps for the first time, what love and discipleship look like. Let us do this, not to make ourselves better than others, but instead so that we might gain a deeper understanding of you, other people, and the selves that you have created us to grow into. Help us to see the good in others and ourselves and to not assume the worst. Give us the grace and strength to be the loving people that this world desperately needs from you. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Pastor Mike is a Minister of Word and Sacrament serving the people of God at Salem Lutheran Church in Toledo, Ohio. Tina Sprouse and Trina Smith are members of Salem and organizers with Norf-End Neighbors, a local community-action group that hosts events for connection, advocates for neighbor-centered improvements and encourages caring relationships that lift up all neighbors in Toledo's North End. Tina currently serves as President.

WHAT IF LOVE REVEALS ME TO BE A HYPOCRITE?

PASTOR MARCUS LOHRMANN

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15)

What if love reveals me to be a hypocrite? Well, truth be told, it won't be a surprise! Even as a teenager I was struck by the contradiction between what God in Christ called me to, and what I revealed in my heart and in the words and deeds I delivered daily. Because my father was a Lutheran School Principal, I also knew something about congregational life. I knew intuitively that life in the church often resembled something other than the Body of Christ.

But I also knew about the relentless love that God reveals in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ Jesus. Here is one whose love doesn't let go of me and who promises to be present "whenever two or three are gathered in (His) name." Here is one who daily embraces me and all who need such an embrace with the precious word of forgiveness. Here is the one who frees me from the idolatry of the need to be right and to trust in the righteousness Christ offers. Here is one whose love frees me and the church to love the other, no matter the circumstance.

What if love reveals me to be a hypocrite? Well, then, I acknowledge that truth and then join the chorus of those similarly afflicted throughout the ages with St. Paul's words, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

1. Can you identify a moment when you particularly felt the hypocrisy between your experience of yourself and your awareness of what God calls you to be, particularly in your relationship with others? Given St. Paul's words, what might you do with the feelings associated with that moment?
2. Have you experienced—or imagined—a time when your congregation could, by the power of the Holy Spirit, acknowledge its own hypocrisy with regard to a given situation and, claiming God's forgiveness in Christ, could forge a new beginning?

We praise you, O God, for the love that you have given to us in Christ Jesus. Grant us your Holy Spirit that rejoicing in your love, we may reflect that love in our lives and in our life together as a congregation. Amen.

Rev. Marcus Lohrmann is a retired Minister of Word and Service and former Bishop of the Northwestern Ohio Synod. He supports parishes throughout the synod as an interim pastor.

DO I HAVE TO LOVE EVEN MY ENEMY?

PASTOR ADAM SORNCHAI

“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

If there is any confusion about the people Jesus calls us to love, not only is our definition of neighbor expanded, but enemies are explicitly named as persons we are to love. Lutheran Christians may wrestle with this, asking the appropriate Lutheran question: What does this mean?

We have seen examples where these words of Jesus are misused, compelling victims to remain in toxic or harmful relationships. Yet we also see how hating anyone, including our enemies, is not the way of the cross which is the way of Jesus, who is the Way.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981), in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a work Vincent Harding once described as “a 1940s version of liberation theology addresses the tension we face when called to love our enemies. Thurman writes, “To love them means to recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons. But to love them does not mean to condone their way of life.” We may not fully appreciate how despised tax collectors were among the Jewish community in Jesus’ day. They were seen as working for the oppressor, exploiting their own people, being ritually unclean, and symbolizing betrayal. This made them the embodiment of an enemy. So, when Jesus befriended tax collectors and even called one of them to follow Him, Thurman says such actions “defy rational explanation.” When Jesus calls Matthew (the tax collector) to follow Him, He shows us that it is not through shame or pressure that love prevails and hearts are turned. Jesus reminds us that behind the abstract labels we assign to groups we consider enemies; there is an individual person within that group. As Thurman puts it, “This man is not just a tax collector; he is a son of God.”

The call to love our enemies is not a call to justify evil acts; it is a call to never lose sight of the individual’s humanity—to remember that each person is created in the image and likeness of God. When we dehumanize others, they become expendable. The world tells us to hate our enemies. Instinctively we might say, “I don’t care for that group, but I like Joe.” Why? Because we see Joe as more than just the group he belongs to. Yet there may be pressure within our own circles saying, “If you really stand for what we stand for, you can’t like Joe.” Hate divides. Love unites.

Matthew being called to follow Jesus was radical enough if it were just the two of them, but it wasn’t. He joined others who would have despised him. They had to learn to love each other and live in community. Both the church universal and local has always had to navigate this reality. Even in congregations that seem homogenous, differences exist that can divide. Yet the call to love all people, including our enemies, shows that the way of Jesus is the way of love that unites when evil seeks to divide.

The love poured out on the cross draws all people to God. When we gather at the altar and at the foot of the cross, it is that same love that makes us one with God and one another.

1. Can you think of a time when you began to see someone you once disagreed with or even considered an "enemy" as more than just the group or label they represented? What helped shift your perspective?
2. How does Jesus' willingness to include someone like Matthew reshape our understanding of what a faithful community looks like?

Almighty God, Your Son, our Savior, called a despised tax collector to become one of his apostles. Help us, like Matthew, to respond to the transforming call of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Pastor Adam Sornchai is a Minister of Word and Sacrament, serving the people of God at St. John Lutheran Church (Windfall) in Cardington, Ohio. He also supports faith leaders through the synod as a Dean of the Southeast Conference.

HOW CAN LOVE OVERCOME WHAT DIVIDES US AND MOVE US FORWARD TOGETHER?

PASTOR DEB MONNIN

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:1-3)

Many of us hear this verse at funerals. It's comforting to know that Jesus is going ahead of us and is preparing rooms in our Father's house for our loved one and for us. It's a relief to know that we will one day be united with Jesus and with all who have gone before us, especially the loved one whom we are missing so much.

It's comforting to know that when we aren't sure what to expect, we will be greeted with love. And I wonder what would happen if we looked for these places right here, where we are right now?

When I was little, I did not like to leave what was familiar. I didn't want to go into church by myself (even though I had been there many times). I didn't want to go into the restroom at the restaurant by myself (even though Mom and Dad were at the table nearby). I certainly didn't want to go talk to the teacher or pastor by myself (even though I knew them). I would always make my little sister go with me; when she came along, it wasn't so scary.

Eventually I realized that Mom and Dad would not leave me - and I could go into these places without being so scared. Because we knew we were loved, my sister and I could go into unknown places together.

Jesus loves you...and you...and you...and you. We are all welcomed, and loved, and yet we are all different. I don't have the same ideas as you; you don't have the same ideas as your neighbor: and yet we are all beloved children of God, created in God's image, loved forever.

And also, we like to group together with others who are like us, going into places and rooms that feel comfortable to us... and often it is uncomfortable (and maybe sometimes scary) to check out another group (or place).

And always Jesus is going before us, making a room and a place for us all. We are all welcome in God's house, even the one here on earth with different rooms.

Could God be inviting us to take a friend (or little sister) and go check out those other rooms—to step across the divides that naturally form when we group together? I bet we'll find Jesus there!!

1. If we are all children of God, each having a place in God's house, why is it so scary to check out the other groups (or go into those other rooms) and meet other siblings in Christ?
2. Share a time when you met another beloved child of God, who seemed totally different than you, or who had different thoughts and ideas than you. How did God's

love give you courage to strike up a conversation, or work on a project together? Did you find anything in common?

Loving God, thank You for going before us and for preparing a place for us. When we are hesitant or afraid to see you in people that are different than we are, invite us into activities and projects where we can be united in Your love. Give us courage and wisdom so that we may notice You in places (and people) where we do not expect You to be. Send Your Holy Spirit upon us; fill us with Your love, shifting our perspectives and enabling us to follow You into a future we never could have imagined. Amen.

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DOES LOVE MEAN AVOIDING POLITICS?

PASTOR STEVE BOND

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:16-18)

You've heard the questions and complaints before, I'm sure—maybe even out of your own mouth. "Why does everything have to become political?" or "Christianity has to do with love and faith, but it should stay out of politics." Or "I just go to church to feel better about life, and politics will just make me uncomfortable!" Been there before? Probably so have most of us. And since many of us were raised with the social rule that "You don't bring up politics or religion in polite company," we tend to get especially squirmy when church folks in particular (or—gasp!—pastors) talk about things that delve into the political. So what are we to do? Can't we just focus on "love," and promising ourselves never to talk about "politics" for the sake of niceness?

Maybe we need to start being clear about what we mean. For a great many folks, the word "politics" immediately triggers "partisanship," with demagogues at podiums who divide us into parties with competing slogans and draw lines between "red states" and "blue states." And all too often that fractures communities (and congregations!) into "us" and "them" groups, which almost inevitably pushes us into "Me-and-My-Group-First!" thinking. But what if politics isn't necessarily about being partisan, but rather doing the important work of promoting the common good for our shared life? That sounds a great deal like love, honestly, since the Scriptures keep reminding us that Christ-like love is never reducible to a mere feeling or empty lip service, but "in deed and truth." As Cornel West famously put it, "Justice is what love looks like in public." We can't avoid addressing how our call to love neighbors (and strangers and enemies) impacts our shared life and resources—that's what politics really is. But what we can do is to engage political questions differently from the angry voices around us who are slow to listen to one another.

Love not only leads us to ask the difficult questions about how we order and organize our common life, but also to risk listening to those who see things differently and still share with us a commitment to the common good. Love calls us to be brave enough to do both: to wrestle with the thorny questions we might rather ignore, and to listen to the other voices at the table whom God has brought across our path.

1. The verses above from 1 John contrast love that shows up only "in word or speech" with the kind that is seen "in deed and truth." What do you think that difference looks like—and why would it matter?
2. How could a commitment to listening graciously change the way that we as Christians approach political questions?

O God whose Love will not let us go, give us the courage to face the difficult questions that come with sharing a common life, the bravery to listen to one another even when we differ, and the daring to love as we have first been loved. Amen.

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WHAT NOW: A LOVING RULE OF LIFE PASTOR TUCKER O'LEARY

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:8-11)

It is the first sentence of the above passage that provides the scriptural basis for the vow of Chastity of the Order of Lutheran Franciscans (OLF). Merriam Webster defines Chastity as "the quality or state of being chaste: such as abstention from unlawful sexual intercourse, abstention from all sexual intercourse, purity in conduct and intention, restraint and simplicity in design or expression or personal integrity." As a minister in the ELCA, a novice in the OLF, and a married father of three, I get the little tune "One of these things is not like the other" quite often as people consider the way my identifies seem incompatible.

However, that isn't how I have come to understand my vow of Chastity as a brother of the OLF. Within our General Rule under the second chapter of vows, Chastity is defined specifically: "the friars of this Order shall care for the things of the Lord so that they have nothing else to do except to love God and neighbor... This vow of chastity shall be a vow to love all, without distinction." Our vow of Chastity is one that draws us towards giving love towards all people within the boundaries of the relationship that we have with that person. This is about respecting how we are all placed in one another's lives.

Having a Rule of life, such as taking this Vow of Chastity, Obedience, and Poverty, can help to guide our decisions and keeps us on the lamp-lit path of Christ. I took on these vows to better follow Christ. To live by the examples of Saints Francis and Clare, and to strive for Christ's rule of loving all to be the example that I set for all whom I meet.

1. Where is God in your community? Have you looked at the food pantry? The local jail? The local homeless shelter?
2. Who is God calling you to love, without distinction, within your community?

Abiding God, you promise to be with us through all our difficulties in life. You promise to love all of your creation without distinction and remind us that love can cover a multitude of sins. Soften our hearts towards the strangers in our communities. Show us where You are and how You are calling us into this community. We thank You, we praise You, we ask for Your guidance through Jesus Christ our risen Savior and Lord. Amen.

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