

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/15/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

The central message of JESUS' ministry, both in words and actions, is the unconditional love of GOD for all people. That message challenged both the social and political environment of HIS time. In John 13:34, JESUS said, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." The apostle John heard that message clearly as reflected in his first letter: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from GOD. Everyone who loves has been born of GOD and knows GOD. Whoever does not love does not know GOD because GOD is love."

While we're probably comfortable loving those we like, JESUS expanded the understanding of love beyond what we might prefer. A lawyer and JESUS discussed the greatest commandment to, "Love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." The lawyer pressed JESUS by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" so JESUS told the Parable of the Good Samaritan to broaden our understanding of neighbor as anyone in need. It further challenged the common thinking of the Jews because the hero of the story, the Samaritan who helped the injured man, was part of a group of people so hated by the Jews that the lawyer wouldn't even say the word "Samaritan." JESUS continues this expansion of the concept of love to include enemies when HE says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Loving enemies in JESUS' time was controversial because that meant loving the Romans. The Romans had occupied Israel and the people were forced to pay taxes to support the occupiers. It also meant loving the religious leaders who had created so many rules about worship that it was much less about GOD and much more about keeping the guidelines that burdened daily life. And for the Jews, it meant loving everyone who wasn't a Jew including those hated Samaritans.

Love one another. Love your neighbor and yourself. Love your enemies. That pretty much covers everyone, doesn't it? First, we need to recognize that the love to which JESUS calls us is the Greek word "agape" which means unconditional love. Agape means treating others the way we want to be treated and without expectation of any return for that love. That can be difficult, especially as it may challenge us to set aside biases with which we have lived for most of our lives. Democrats, Republicans, and others should love one another unconditionally. Men and women should love one another unconditionally. LGBTQ and straight people should love each other. Citizens and immigrants should love one another. Employers and employees should show each other love. White people and people of color should love each other. You get the idea. Love everyone. And do so because GOD loves everyone unconditionally. I saw a meme that said, "JESUS love you. Terms and conditions apply. See Bible for details." That's wrong. The Bible doesn't say this. Rather JESUS said that GOD loves everyone. And to prove that, JESUS died...for everyone. Without condition. Without requirement. You are loved by GOD and your only choice is whether to reject that love or not. But claiming GOD's unconditional love for yourself also means showing GOD's unconditional love to others. To everyone. Simply because GOD loves them and you.

In CHRIST's love,  
Pastor Jeffrey