



LESSONS IN LIVING

Loving Through Difficult Times

“Part 1: Love Is a Balance of the Virtues”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
August 9, 2026

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Even if I can speak in all the tongues of earth—and those of the angels too—but do not have love, I am just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy such that I can comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge, or if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own to feed those poorer than I, then hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Sermon

Hello everyone. I haven't seen y'all in a while. And this is great, because we always have a bald spot right there. (*Waving his arms in a circular motion indicating the central region just in front of him*) And so watching it on YouTube, it's a big empty space and it looks like we're about to go out of business. [*laughter*] So that's very helpful. This is going to hopefully save me a hundred conversations after church. I just got back from writing leave; I had a great first week. Then I developed an infection and my cough came back and I threw my back out. And so it was another excuse not to finish the book. [*laughter*] It's worth the pain to have a good excuse. [*laughter*]

We're starting a new sermon series today on loving through harsh times. And probably the most prominent feedback I get, not only here, but just in general, is how exhausted people are. How numb a lot of people feel, how afraid people are. And I think that's all very understandable.

I've never forgotten one of the associates we had here some years back had an aunt, I believe it was, who worked for Vanity Fair, if I'm not mistaken. She interviewed the Trump family. And found out that Donald Trump, Ivana, is that her name? Maybe wife number two. OK, so first wife, I guess number one. Ivana said that he kept speeches from Hitler beside his bed. His response, of course, was, I'm not going to say whether or not I have those books, but if I had them, I'd never read them." [*laughter*] He was also very influenced by one of the masterminds of the Red Scare, McCarthy witch hunts.

I think it's very important for Christians not to go to sleep right now, as tempting as that is. We have to manage our feelings and our emotions, but to realize staying awake right now is very important. Because fascism relies on us getting so depressed and checking out. But you have within you what it takes to cope with this. I mean, my hope is it isn't as bad as it looks. That's my hope. We'll find out in the midterms whether we're the United States of America or Trumpistan. But either way, what's missing in the United States are the profound principles that have always made a decent society.

You don't have to go to the Republican side of the aisle to see people without principle. The Democrats really want universal healthcare unless somebody tries to actually do it. Every other developed nation has that, but we're seen as insane and crazy if we advocate for it. People are worried about us becoming socialist. How about getting a union that isn't under attack all the time?

When we first started, St. Andrew's was already here when I got here, but it was a very conservative church, and you can kind of guess how that worked out. At first, it wasn't a problem because I talked about ideals and things, but I had no political commitment. So everybody liked me because I didn't stand up for anybody. And that's what I'd been taught preaching is supposed to be, this kind of inert, "gee, that's very interesting, thank you, pastor." The first kind of slogan we had was a little church with a big heart because it was a very small church dying on the vine. We turned that around. Then I stole from Thomas Keating the "*Open minds, Open hearts.*" So did the Methodists, so that kind of ruined that.

I very earnestly believe that we're in a new chapter. I don't think inclusivity is enough. It's one thing to say anybody can come in the door. It's something else to say we're going to stand up for you. If you're being assaulted by the leaders that be, the powers that be, we will advocate for you. I will have wasted my life if this becomes a comfortable bourgeois liberal church. That does not interest me at all. We need to become a catalyst. And this may be generations away, and we can't despair because of that. We have to realize that our time in history now is to remind people what it means to be human.

Jesus didn't just talk about religious stuff. Jesus was very political. When he talked about the Kindom of God, that's a political notion. It's saying the earth should be governed the way we imagine heaven. Can you imagine a heaven that has slums in it? Can you imagine a heaven where there are scapegoats who their government labeled them and attacked them and accused them?

This is a quote I saw on the internet, so it's got to be valid. But I don't have the name, so if anybody knows the name—but if you look at the parables, they're about the kindom. They're not about having a personal relationship with Jesus. Why would Jesus need us for that? Is it a Lonely Hearts Club kind of thing? What is needed is people who will love and heal humankind. And he called that the Kindom of God.

The Bible has a book called Kings. If it was apolitical, that book wouldn't be there. That's when the prophets go and confront the political powers that be. When Moses went to the Pharaoh, that was politics. When Jesus disrupted business at the temple, that wasn't just religious, that was

political on behalf of the outcasts. Here's a beautiful expression, I think, of the way heaven should be understood. *(reading from a document)*

“Jesus taught us to pray this way: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Imagine claiming to believe in heaven where everyone has what they need, where people from every race, nationality, and language are present, where the water, air, and land are clean, lush, and vibrant. Where there's no war, oppression, or exploitation, where everyone is treated with dignity, then turning right around and raging against anyone who wants those things here on Earth, calling them socialist. And somehow we cannot see the contradiction.”

It may be helpful to think of Donald Trump as a stage magician, a hypnotist. Because I believe what he's done is what Hitler did, which is to plant hypnotic phrases, repeat them a hundred times. So when a journalist writes something critical, what's the word that pops to the front? Fake news. Fake news. Right? So it shuts thinking down. A lot of people misunderstand propaganda as trying to brainwash you in a certain way. What good propaganda does is shut down your critical thinking. So that when you see criticism coming from any journalist in the world, that phrase pops in your mind and you just stop exploring the thought.

The attack on science, using COVID as a kind of a mask to go after the scientists. And the people who didn't love America enough to wear masks are the ones explaining to the rest of us what traitors we are. If anybody's smarter than you, you call them ‘woke.’ If somebody wants healthcare, a livable wage, what is that? Yeah, it's communism now. It was socialism, now it's communism. *[laughter]* And you know how MAGA studies history! That was a joke. *[laughter]*

But to realize these are human beings who for very valid reasons, sometimes, feel frustrated and angry. And what Donald Trump has done is reroute that. That's what every demagogue in history has done. To convince the people of privilege that they're being attacked by their own scapegoats.

In the early Church, love wasn't this ambiguous word. We're told to love everybody, and it doesn't make any sense because for most people, love is a feeling. But in the early church, love was the balance of the virtues. So we're about to start a tour of Paul's verse on love. We're not going to talk about that part of it today, but that'll be the next weeks and weeks, to look at the words that he used and what they meant at the time. To enrich and realize it's not about mustering feelings that you don't have. If somebody has hurt you or traumatized you and is dangerous, you're not going to start with the feelings. There were four great virtues in the ancient world. Now we don't want to just stop there because they also had slaves. They were fine with empire. Women didn't get much of a say. So we can't rest in that, but that's a helpful starting place to think through what are the virtues that are necessary for love.

Someone who has no virtues cannot be a friend. And when we pretend that's not so, when we play footsie with gaslighting and pretend like we're having a legitimate conversation, that's less loving than a confrontation. Does that make sense? If somebody is caught in a false worldview and they're hurting other people, at some level they feel that. But that thought is so shameful that

this hypnotic stuff keeps them from ever looking at it. Fortunately, more and more Republicans are stepping out of MAGA. It's just going kind of slow there.

So the four virtues of the classic world, and once again, you're not limited to that, courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. *Courage, Temperance, Wisdom, Justice*. To me, courage and temperance are the virtues of an artist. There's nobody braver than an artist. The amount of courage it takes to feel the pain of the world is greater than the courage to be violent. To be creative requires more courage than to be violent. So MAGA makes you afraid of everybody.

Remember, they try to pretend that the fentanyl was coming from Venezuela. So they murdered some people who may or may not have been smuggling drugs, but that's not really a capital offense. And America shrugged. You need to realize that by not standing up for those people, we put ourselves in more danger. MAGA is going to nibble at the edges and go for the people that we don't stand up for; if we don't stand up for transgender people, if we don't stand up for voting rights. Love has to struggle.

And that's what we're going to see during this series, the qualities of a human being that are necessary to love. If I don't have courage, then I'm going to believe that Sharia law is a real threat in Texas. Is that the stupidest thing you've ever heard? It's tragic. Tragically stupid. Or that immigrants have a greater crime rate than citizens, which is a lie. But the problem is that most Americans have a lot of the prejudices that Donald Trump has. He's the lesion, he's not the cancer. And as I've said before, the anti-immigrant sentiment, the racism, the sexism, didn't arrive with Donald Trump. It came over on the Mayflower. We need to be different. And more and more voices are coming from the Church. It's an amazing thing to see that Donald Trump may have damned America, but he's helping the progressive Church in one way. There's a lot of people finding their voices.

One of the ways to think about love in this early Church viewpoint is the virtues are like strings on a guitar, and love is the beautiful melody that you play. But you have to have courage. You have to have temperance. You can't let desire give you tunnel vision. Love tells you how to keep things in balance.

There's a prayer I ran across. It's just so hard now, and I know that, and I know that people don't want to hear it, and if we had more time, I'd be more than happy not to preach about this. I have a great series on insects of the Bible that I think you're just going to— *[laughter]* This was a prayer from a rabbi. *(Jim reading from a document)*

My God, the soul you have placed in me is pure and vulnerable. I'm afraid that looking at today's news will be painful. Encircle me in a robe of light so that I can witness the wounds of the world without being wounded.

Of course, we all get wounded, and all of us have to step back from time to time. But what if we're the first responders? What if we are the EMS workers, the firefighters? What if the Church is not supposed to just get people in heaven and let earth go to hell, but instead do all we can do to make it on earth as it is in heaven?

We're not in control of the politics, but we can get in control of our own hearts. We can heal some of the hatred, some of the frustration that we carry with us, understandably. You have no

idea what a gift it will be if you become a model, an example of someone with an open heart. We're not going to win arguments for a long time. We may or may not win elections. We'll see in the midterms, again. But the foundation of your life should be on that which can't be taken from you. And there's nothing in fate that can't be taken from you. But your character, your virtues that you choose to build your life on, can be what makes love the most secure platform there is for living.

So the first two virtues are courage, temperance. Those are virtues of the heart, I think. Then wisdom.

How many people were raised in the Presbyterian Church here? About 6 people. *[laughter]* Okay. Good work, Carol. *[laughter]* Did the Apostles' Creed make anyone in this room wise? Does knowing whether there's two people in the Trinity or three, does that change your commitment to love and justice? So what we're trying to do is follow someone who's actually calling us to ourselves. We don't know how much of the story is legendary and mythological. We just simply don't. But the stories touch us in a way, and the words touch us in a way that can really change our lives.

When you talk to a friend who's falling into the MAGA worldview, to realize they're not trying to be stubborn and evasive. That part of their mind is occupied. You're talking to somebody in a cult. So you don't have to play footsie with it, but to realize there's a human being there. And if we're not loving, they'll try to defend this till the end of their days. We have to build a fire escape where they know that when they stop hating all these people—you know, I'm not partisan. *[laughter]* I'm really not. I mean, my issue is universal human rights. I don't consider that to be partisan. But for that reason, because the Republican Party is attacking almost everybody I care about, my non-partisanship calls me to oppose that.

You look at Paxton's campaign, it's so sad. I mean, I knew Cornyn was going down when he made his big slogan that he was going to save Medicaid. Medicaid or Medicare. From whom? Who's attacking? And Paxton, has he mentioned any positions at all? It's all, I hate this person, I hate this person, I hate this person. People get tired of hating. Unfortunately, more and more progressive people have turned just as ugly and dishonest. We need to be the ones that speak wisely. With healing tones.

When we keep our mind open, when we stay curious, we keep learning. The people around us are touched in a different way. We may not be able to win the argument, but we may not have to because there's something deeper than politics that we're really talking about. So if you keep your mind open at a time that it hurts to do it. It hurts with this propaganda. You want to attack back, very understandably. But if you can make your mind an expression of a greater love, it will heal the world much more than any argument is ever going to.

Now here's the last of the virtues, which is *Justice*. Again, in church, in seminary, I was not taught a political gospel. And I don't think that the message should ever be reduced to politics, but if your gospel does not include how people are treated in the real world, what worth is it? Justice. My favorite definition of justice is giving others every right you claim for yourself. I think it was an atheist who came up with that. When you're a white person To get in touch with

your white supremacy, you're going to have to go into a struggle, into a work with people who love you very much, who can call out the parts that you can't see. If you're a male—and I know male fragility, I've got that too. But I think 40,000 years of abuse is enough, don't you think? Might be time to share the world. Think about what the species will be like when we listen to everybody. How many geniuses were never heard because you had to be a gray-haired guy. Nothing against old guys.

There was a priest in Central America who had a quote,

When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.

So if you're following Jesus Christ, they're going to call you a communist. You understand that. You look at the Beatitudes, he's warning you. *Blessed are you if you're persecuted for love.* We have hope because of people in similar times through history that remembered their humanity and became examples of what people need to return to. We all have that opportunity right now.

Love is more powerful than hate. A mother bear is almost invincible, not because she hates her enemy, but because she loves her young. There's a fierce love that doesn't have to hate. It may have to struggle, it may have to fight, but when we let hate into our hearts, when we start calling other people names, when we make fun of the governor for being in a wheelchair, we unravel everything that we're trying to communicate. What a gift it will be if you give as much of your life as you can to your highest value and love with all of your strength. This is a god-awful time in a whole lot of ways. But for us, it's an incredible opportunity that doesn't happen often in history for us to show we're serious about compassion and love and justice.

Paul at one point says, what good is it to have all the virtues if I don't have love? So that's one side of the aisle. But the other side is when you can't figure out how to love, it's really helpful to remember the great virtues and let love help organize those and tune them. Love with all of your heart, mind, and strength. What an incredible gift you will give the world. You will be a lantern that shines in the middle of midnight, reminding people what it's like to care, reminding people what it's like to be honest, reminding people what it's like to have courage.

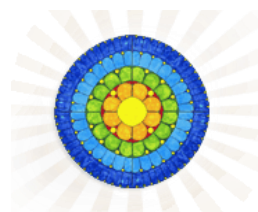
I love this church. I've given my life to this church, but I will have wasted my life if the best we do is this inclusive church that doesn't stand up for anybody. What if we go into training to learn what love would look like in this time? And we commit to each other and to the world that we will become catalysts of change. That is the only way I know whereby we can make it on earth as it is in heaven.

I invite you now to your own reflection on these words.

Benediction

I think a lot of times we have to do it wrong before we can do it right. Probably most of the time. And that's the work, to not get down on yourself when you make a mistake, but to work at transformation. When your anger and your bitterness become courage, when your sadness and your depression become compassion – what a gift you will be as you live this week. And that spirit is to forgive yourself when you fall short, and when you are able to feel compassion, to be sure to show it. Thank you for spending the morning with us. Go in peace.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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