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“A Careful Waste of Kindness”
Text: Matthew 5:43-48
Thanksgiving – 11/24/11

The words *careful* and *waste* don't usually belong together because those who are careful usually don't waste things and those who waste things usually aren't very careful. But I'd like you to indulge me today as we make one exception. **On this Thanksgiving festival we think about our God, who is careful and yet wastes.**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we turn our attention to our gospel reading from Matthew chapter 5, beginning at verse 43 as we combine those two words—careful and waste. **A careful waste of kindness.**

As we do so I'd like you to think about the contrast that you will see today. We will talk about the way that people usually think; and then we will see God's way and the way God thinks; and the way he invites you to think as you consider his kindness to you.

Man's usual way

Here's the usual way: verse 43 of Matthew chapter 5 from the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" That's the usual way. "You have heard that it was said..." but where did they hear it from? It certainly wasn't from the laws of Moses. When God had called the people of Israel to love him above all things, to love their neighbors as they loved themselves, he also included those whom might have been considered their enemies. You might think about how Moses had instructed them in the book of Exodus, "*If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off be sure to take it back to them.*" Show love to your enemy. Or in Proverbs chapter 25, "*If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.*" Saint Paul quoted these same words. Show unconditional love.

No, this thinking of "*love your neighbor but hate your enemy*" was not a product of God. It was a product of the three pounds or so of grey matter between our ears because it makes sense. It makes sense for you to be kind to your neighbor! Do you know where the word "neighbor" comes from? "Neigh" which means *near* and "bor," which means *dweller*. A neighbor is someone who lives near you. To the Jews this meant fellow Jews, but not those heathen scum outside the borders. They are not our neighbors; we don't have to love them.

It makes sense to love your neighbor. **Why? Because I've got a neighbor who has a twelve horse power, two-stage, self-propelled Toro snow thrower. I don't have one of those. So when that first fifteen inch wet snowfall comes along, I will be very glad that I have loved my neighbor during the summer, and that I occasionally went over the lawn-line with my lawnmower; and I patted myself on the back because I was such a good neighbor, and I greeted him in the morning, "Hey, how ya doing neighbor!" I will be very glad because he will let me use his snow thrower. It pays.**

It makes sense to be kind and to love your neighbor; and it also makes sense to hate your enemy. **What about that person who makes life miserable for you at work, maybe it's a fellow-employee, maybe it's your boss, or maybe it's an employee of yours? Maybe it is somebody who slanders you and constantly makes life hard for you at school. Maybe it is a neighbor that is just hard to get along with for whatever reason. It makes sense to treat them like dirt.** Give them forgiveness?! Loan them money?! Do a kind deed that we know will never get repaid?! Forget it! That's not how life works. That seems fair to us. That's man's usual way.

God's unusual way

Now let me show you God's way. Verse 44: *"But I tell you,"* which is Jesus way of saying, "Can I remind you of what the law really says, and what God meant when he spoke to you a couple thousand years ago... *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."* Did you ever notice that God never tells us to *like* our enemies? "Like" means that I have fond feelings for this person. He never says that. In fact, there are some people we probably shouldn't have fond feelings for—when they are slandering the name of God, when they are dragging the name of Jesus down, when they are leading others to hell—how can I have fond feelings for them and what they are doing? But God does say, "Love them." "Love" is that unique word "agape;" it's the word that's associated with God's kind of love—the kind that allowed him to look at an enemy and say, "I devote myself to you and to your welfare." *"Love your enemies,"* he says, *"Pray for those who persecute you, who make you miserable because you follow God, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."*

It is so much fun watching families because you see this little guy running up the aisle and you say, "I know your daddy! I can tell because you look just like him!" **God is not saying that doing good things makes us his children, but that as his children you are recognized because your life starts looking like him.** And what does God look like? Look at the next verse, *"He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."* Doesn't it almost seem like God is being wasteful... carefully wasteful? *Carefully* because this is no accident. God is very, very intentional about the way he spends his love and kindness. He causes his sun to rise on everyone, the evil—those who thumb their noses at God and reject his salvation and do what they want and couldn't care less about him—he treats them the same way he treats his dear children. He loves them. The sun comes up the rain comes down; their crops grow; they get income; things go well. God, is that fair? He looks back at us and says, "No, that's not fair... that's grace. That's undeserved kindness." It almost seems like God is wasteful.

Bless him for that. And don't forget: his extravagant, wasteful, carefully planned kindness goes way beyond the cars you've been driving and the nice house you just built an addition on this summer, the job you've had for the last 30 years, the family that you've been given, the nice clothes that you've worn (so much so that you had to have two closets just to hold them all), the food that you're going to be filling yourself with tomorrow and the rest of the year. It goes way beyond the cabin you go to, the condos you rent, the vacations you take, the hunting trips you've been able to indulge yourself with, the fish that you've caught. No, it goes to the next level. Just as God has been indulgent in giving food and drink and clothing to the world, he has also been very indulgent in giving salvation to the world. In fact, one of the things that marks us as Lutheran Christians is our determination to preach that no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter when you have lived—Jesus Christ died to fully pay for all the sins you have committed, and there are no strings attached to that. That is such an outlandish teaching (we call it *objective justification*, that God objectively has justified the world) that there are even a fair amount of Christians who can't swallow it. They think, "Maybe Jesus died for those

who would come to believe in him. Maybe Jesus died for people who were kindly disposed towards them.” No! *“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good.”* He caused Christ’s blood to drip down on the evil and the outwardly good because they all need it. They all need his justifying love. That’s God’s way.

More than being nice to the nice

Let’s go back to man’s way. Jesus puts it this way, *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”* Isn’t that an amazing point that Jesus makes? You don’t have to be a Christian to be nice to nice people. **Unbelievers believe that too. I had a lady in my last congregation who was a member of the church of Satan before she joined our church. She gave me a copy of the Satanic bible. You may be unaware that, just like we have the Ten Commandments, the Satanic bible has the nine Satanic statements. Let me read number four for you: “Satanism represents kindness to those who deserve it, not love wasted on ingrates. ... There is nothing in Satanism encourages wanton cruelty or unkindness. There is nothing productive in that. But it is also unproductive to waste your energy on people who will not appreciate it or reciprocate it. Treating others as they treat you will form meaningful productive bonds, while letting parasites know that you will not waste your time with them.”** Aren’t you glad that your God didn’t think that way? That you were just a parasite? That he was wasting his time on you?

The way of the world is be nice to the nice, but what is the way of God? *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* Now what does “perfect” mean? “Perfect” means being the complete human being—the complete man, the complete woman, the complete teenager, the complete boy or girl—that God always had in mind when he created the first human beings. Be perfect. And be so perfect that you are exactly like the God in heaven who made you.

But you and I both know we’re not perfect. **We rightly confess Sunday after Sunday, “I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good.” How desperately we cry out for God to forgive us!**

Grace that motivates grace

But you know, there is a human being who is the complete vision of everything God intended for humanity because he is his own Son. When God sent his Son into the world, Jesus was everything that God delighted in. “This is my Son!” God’s voice thundered from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, as he began that ministry of salvation. “With him I am well pleased!” **His perfection was credited to us sinners.** And all of the lovelessness, all of the disobedience that belongs to you and me and every human being was placed on him. He who perfectly obeyed God’s laws throughout his life pleased his Father without spot or blemish, then took all of that wickedness that you and I committed upon his own shoulders. He willingly lowered himself to become the criminal, the one who would fall under the wrath of God instead of his pleasure, the one who would be killed by the very people whom he was saving with his blood. And when they were mocking him and yanking out his beard and spitting on his face and nailing him to a tree, he would look at them with that perfect character as the Son of God and say, *“Father, forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing.”*

It’s when you and I recognize the perfect Son of God and all that he did **to set us free from our guilt** that we start listening when St. Paul says to you and me, “Aim for perfection.” “But God I can’t do that.”

God says, "I know." Aim for perfection because it's watching God's own Son give his all that leads us to say, "Father, how can I respond? How can I show God's love to you? Yes, your law condemns me, but your gospel has set me free to serve you in righteousness and joy all the days of my life."

It's that extravagant kindness that leads us to begin to examine the people in our own life. Here's a question for you: who are the people in your life that most desperately need to see the love of Christ from you? I suspect that it is those who cause you to grit your teeth. Maybe it is a neighbor who surely is not looking for your friendship or your approval. Or maybe it is somebody at work or school who you are tempted to avoid if at all possible when you pass in the hallway. Maybe it is even somebody in your own family—a brother-in-law, a sister, an aunt or uncle who you just don't want to go visit on Thanksgiving. Maybe it's even in your own house—that husband or wife who doesn't give you the love and respect and honor that you so desperately crave. Are they the ones that God would look at and tell you, "Have you seen my Son lately? Would you show the same kind of love to them that I have so freely given to you in the way I have cared for you and in the way I have saved you?"

On this Thanksgiving Day maybe the biggest thing that we should be giving thanks for is not the mashed potatoes and gravy and the sweet potatoes and the turkey and all those good things we are going to be eating tomorrow. Maybe the biggest thing we ought to give thanks for is that our God in heaven is NOT like us; that God's way is different from our way! That his ways are as high above ours as the heavens are above the earth, and that is why we are able to say so loudly and with such confidence, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! And his love endures forever." Now that's careful, wasteful, kindness. Praise him for it! Amen.