

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—19May19**  
**Jn 13**  
**“Love With An Edge”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

It's such a cliché about Christians.

It's so common that even I, a Christian, get tired of hearing it!

The cliché is this: Christians are identified by the *love* that we share—the love that we were given by God, the love shown to us by Jesus Christ.

I'm not excited when I hear skeptics say something like this. I'm not excited--because I know that the next words out of their mouths will be: “How come I know people who go to church and yet they are selfish and unpleasant? How can people who claim to be Christians not love their neighbors?”

While those critics are predictable, they also hit home. We Christians often do have trouble following the command of Jesus that appears in today's Gospel reading.

The reading says that Jesus told his disciples, “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.”

“Show me the love!” the skeptics say. “Show me the love!” We Christians aren't very good at loving our neighbors. Very often, we even fight amongst ourselves!

Of course, the short answer to the skeptics is that Christians are imperfect. And because we are fallible, we sometimes act in ways that aren't loving.

As it happens, we Christians were aware of our failings long before modern skeptics pointed them out. One of the ancient prayers in our Prayer Book asks God to purify the Church “where it is corrupt.”

The prayer also asks that the church be corrected “where it is in error.” These prayers leave no doubt that Christians need to behave better.

But just knowing that we need to be more loving doesn't let us off the hook. We still need to ask how we could put Christ's admonition into action.

One way that our Episcopal Church approaches this problem is to encourage us to start from our own limitations. We are fallible; so our faith is going to be fallible, too.

Here's an example of how the Episcopal Church tries to allow for the imperfections of our members. Consider our customs regarding *church-going*.

Some denominations insist that their members must go to church every Sunday. If you miss a week, you have committed a sin!

In contrast, our church recognizes that some people can't make it to church very often. Instead of trying to make them feel guilty, we encourage these folks to pray privately at home and try to attend when they can.

We also have a pragmatic response to Christ's command to love our neighbors. We realize that we aren't saints. But we can all find some things to do to help others.

One suggestion I often make to Christians who live in New York is to look to their physical neighbors—people who live in the same building or on the same block. Most of us know of someone nearby who is lonely. Or someone who is old or infirm who finds it hard to function on a daily basis.

In my experience, such people—particularly the elderly—tend to be underserved by social agencies. They are often timid, and they hesitate to ask for help. Unlike the more aggressive needy persons that we encounter on the streets, these lonely folks tend to keep to themselves. No one knows the troubles of their lives. All the more reason for us Christians to reach out to them.

That said, loving any neighbor gets complicated. There are few issues in life more edgy than love!

We perpetually seek love. We are often disappointed by relationships. Even within a relationship, we can want more love. And, of course, when it is up to us to love in return, we often fail to deliver.

In these cases, we need more than teachings. We need *examples* of how to live a loving Christian life.

I'm often encouraged by one friend I have who is exceptionally full of love. My friend is always reaching out to people.

Instead of worrying about how people are treating *him*, he is the first to offer them friendship. Instead of worrying about the attention he is receiving himself, he makes sure to care for others.

My friend keeps careful track of the names and contact information of people he meets; often, he keeps in touch with casual acquaintances until they become friends. When he is with you, he asks pertinent and interesting questions about how you are doing. At the same time, he tells you how his own life is going.

There's an edge here, of course. His outgoing personality isn't always appreciated. But when he is rebuffed, my friend doesn't waste time feeling rejected. He just goes on to befriend someone else. He recognizes that you only become more loving by giving love away!

Granted, my friend has a talent for sharing himself that others of us may envy. Yet, we can still be encouraged by his example.

As our lesson indicates, Christ believed that everyone can show love. May God inspire us to new ways of loving so that we may "walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us."

*And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.*