My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

 This week’s scripture follows on the heels of last week’s exhortations from Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain. Remember the blessings? “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be filled”, and many other things. But he also included some woes. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” Wait a minute. But we like being liked. Will Rogers famously didn’t meet a person he didn’t like. Is Jesus saying that it’s actually a good thing to be disliked?

 He says in the opening lines of this week to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who are abusive to us. Now, I don’t know about you, but I don’t anyone who leaps for joy when folks speak ill about them, and while we are all self-critical to some extent, we certainly don’t invite people to throw rotten tomatoes our way on a regular basis.

 And yet, Jesus says it. We’re not talking here about ordinary, everyday interactions that annoy us. You know, like when you’re pulling out of a parking space and someone walks across the middle of the street, delaying your departure, and by then the red traffic light down the block has turned and by the time the person crosses the street, you’re blocked in by a wall of cars. Or at the library when you’re approaching the librarian and someone dashed up for the “quick question” and maybe also a follow-up or two, and a quick question becomes several minutes. We’re talking about Jesus telling us that we have to love folks who come after us, who have it in for us for some reason or another. We may not know why, but each of us has people who reeaallly don’t like us. And Jesus calls us not just to put up with the annoyances they cause our lives, but to treat them in a Godly manner. Bless them. Pray for them. Love them.

 How many of us can say we follow this advice? I don’t always do it. I’m not going to ask for a show of hands but I think if we all searched our hearts we would have a hard time saying we followed Jesus on this one.

A therapist would say that this is an example of a negative interaction and relationship and that we should probably limit these for our self-care. Good advice.

But we also take God seriously. How do we ***do*** this?

 When someone is unkind and acts out on us in a way that we just don’t understand and did nothing to cause a “negative interaction”, what’s our reaction? (take all answers). On our better days, it’s Hurt. Confusion. Bewilderment. Sometimes when we’re not at our best, we retaliate by engaging them in their argument on their terms, what happens? Voices get raised. We start doing tit-for-tat insults or comparisons of events or people in our past. But we don’t walk away.

 And when we engage folks who have it out for us in this manner, all we’re doing is confirming for them, and maybe for the people seeing our interaction, that indeed we are the problem. But here’s something that all spiritual teachers know. Folks who are filled with hate for others hate themselves first. Before we even arrived in their lives, they are seeking an outlet for the violence they feel for their own soul and self. If we hadn’t come along, it would be something or someone else.

 Folks who have inward violence toward themselves are also that way in their family, too, but they cannot stand to be in the presence of love. It’s too much, and they explode. The challenge is for us not to explode back.

 So on many occasions, God has asked us to look. Look at ourselves. Turn around, believe the good news, and love God who tells us to love all. What keeps us from doing that? It’s not the other person, or the tit-for-tat events or people in our past. It’s our ego. Our pride. Or the big three we’ve talked about: fear of failure, fear of being unloved, or the ultimate biggie, fear of losing control. We feel we have to control every interaction to make it turn out for us when we’re attacked, and so we fight back. I’m not saying it’s right or wrong. I am saying it's human; Jesus understands and forgives us for THAT.

 So we have this dark part of ourselves that loves the world and its ways, and those traits and impulses are not God. We covet. We lie. We do not love our neighbor, and especially not the *Mean Girls*. An instructive movie for all ages, I highly recommend it, especially in this age of social media and its frenzy.

 We think we are nice. Our egos tell us that. And yet we find ways to twist and bend our minds and lives so that we do not have to follow God’s simple commands. We rationalize our way out. Because to break addiction to our egos, social status, personas, or appearances, we have to empty ourselves of the world. We would have to give up the excess in our nest eggs and try and be poor. We would have to give up our Costco membership and extra freezer and try and be hungry. We would have to lose someone dear to us and know what poor in spirit really means. To follow God means to give it all up and give ourselves space for God that is filled by our ego, which doesn’t like to give up anything for anyone.

 We have met the enemy and it is…(us). Yes. It’s us. Not our enemies. Not the poor. Not the hungry or homeless. We are all too willing to blame others for the problems that we, ourselves, create in ourselves, and then we blast out that anxiety in ways that make real inequalities in our society and not in a good way.

 In ways that stereotype folks as underprivileged. Or uneducated. Or a lost cause.

 THAT is why God says we love without pre-condition. Because God loved us first without labels. Why can’t we also extend that to God’s beloved creation in gratitude for what God gives us—that grace called love?

 I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

 Each day we have opportunities to see each other in new ways and a new light. Each day we have ways we can turn our lives into vessels of grace. Maybe the best way to start is for us to start to really see and hear each other is with an ear to understand, rather than an ear to respond. When we get frustrated, rather than say, “What’s wrong with you?!”, maybe we can engage and say, “What’s going on?”.

 One of the best ways to de-escalate arguments is to reach out and hold the hand of the person with whom you disagree. It’s almost impossible to raise your voice to someone you’re physically connected with. You feel the other person’s warmth and humanity. You come to realize that they are no longer the enemy, and that maybe the power of love can overcome what seem like a chasm of differences.

 Jesus says for us to do difficult things. That’s what carrying a cross is—it’s hard to do each day, as Luke wants us to do. But if we keep rationalizing our way out of the difficult stuff, then we’re doing religion by being here in church, and not true spiritual transformation. There is a journey which requires us giving up our own addiction to the world and it’s rewards and status. And I hope we’re learning that spiritual journey is worth more than we had hoped for.

Thanks be to God, Amen.