

## **love is not irritable**

Matthew 5:21-24

January 22, 2017

I am irritated.

I am irritated by reckless drivers and TV commercials and Pittsburgh Steeler fans.

I am irritated by people full of themselves, by people who like to hear themselves talk.

I am irritated by bullies, by people who belittle and intimidate other people, who make people feel bad and don't care.

I am irritated by people who don't listen, by people who already have their minds made up and will not even try to see things from another point of view.

I am irritated by bigots, by people who dismiss whole classes of people, simply because of their gender or race or sexuality or heritage.

I am irritated by climate change deniers, by people who are ready to put this planet and the future generations who will live on it at risk for the sake of the conveniences of life as usual.

I am irritated by a Christian pastor, a representative of Jesus, using a national stage to declare that God is NOT against building walls.

I am irritated. But, love is not irritated. Cliff read us the scripture this morning: "Love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritated." Right?

Wrong! Listen again: "Love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable." Love is not irritable: crabby, cantankerous, carping, complaining ... cross, crotchety, grouchy, grumbling ... huffy, prickly, testy, touchy. Ouch! Who wants to be around irritable?

You know what irritable looks like. If you live in a household with more than one person in it, I know you know what irritable looks like. Even if you do live in a household with just one person in it, I know you know what irritable looks like and feels like. Irritable is a scowling face and a tensed-up body, a cold shoulder and a quick temper. Irritable almost always has something to say: Leave me alone! Get out of my face! Bug off! And those are among the nicer things irritable has to say. Its crueler words are more personal: You're wrong. You're stupid. You're hopeless.

Irritable speaks harshly, unkindly, cruelly, and that is why love is never irritable. Irritable inflicts pain, but love will not inflict pain. Love is patient and kind. Love is not irritable.

Jesus spoke about words that cause pain. In fact, he compares cruel and harsh words to murder:

*You have heard that people were told in the past, "Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial." But now I tell you: if you are angry with your brother you will be brought to trial, if you call your brother "You good-for-nothing!" you will be brought before the Council, and if you call your brother a worthless fool you will be in danger of going to the fire of hell.*

"Fool." "Numbskull." "Jerk." "Failure." "Airhead." "Klutz." "Idiot." Words hurt. Putdowns do damage. They can cause wounds, deep wounds. They can kill spirits and sometimes, they kill bodies, too. You have heard the stories of lives destroyed by bullying, young lives with spirits still growing and forming and fragile driven to suicide by cruel words. Every putdown is a personal attack. Every cruel word is a kind of murder.

Love won't do that. Irritable is full of itself. It is selfish. It only cares about its own feelings. It doesn't care what damage its words and actions inflict. But love is not irritable. Love is not selfish. Love cares about how the other person feels. Love gets outside of itself, speaking and acting not only in its own interest, but in the interest of the other as well.

Jesus calls us to a higher form of righteousness, a deeper form of love, not merely obeying the law, but respecting the intent of the law. Not stealing also means not stealing a brother's dignity. Not killing also means not killing a sister's self-esteem.

Don't even try to make peace with God, Jesus says, until you have first made peace with your brother.

*... if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God.*

Loving your brother matters that much. Not being irritable -- with your brother, with your sister, with your parents, with your friends, with anybody -- matters that much.

But this is where it gets complicated. We look to Jesus, the bearer of God's light, love's pure light, and we listen when Jesus says:

*But now I tell you: if you are angry with your brother you will be brought to trial, if you call your brother "You good-for-nothing!" you will be brought before the Council, and if you call your brother a worthless fool you will be in danger of going to the fire of hell.*

But, tell me, was Jesus ever angry? Jesus was angry with the merchants who turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves. Jesus was angry with his disciples for turning children away from him. Jesus was angry with religious

leaders who carefully counted out their tithes, but neglected to do justice and practice mercy, leaders who appear good on the outside, but are full of sin on the inside.

And Jesus called them names: hypocrites, snakes, children of snakes, blind guides, whitewashed tombs. “You hypocrites!” he told them. “You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside.” Wow!

So was Jesus a hypocrite? Did he violate the laws of love he so fervently espoused? Jesus was irritated, yes, but was he irritable?

Love is not selfish or irritable. The two go together. Irritable is selfish. It defends its own space, its own feelings. It gets angry about the injustices, real or imagined, done to it. But Jesus defends the little ones, the vulnerable ones, the needy ones. He defends their feelings. He gets angry about the injustices done to them. His love is not selfish. His love is not irritable.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable ... but sometimes love gets angry. Love is not about being nice. It's not about being pleasant and agreeable. It's not about being sweet. Love is not about being loving.

Being nice, being loving, have to do with my attitude, my demeanor, with the way I project myself to the world, a way I am in general. But love is always specific. Love is always about “you,” about a particular “you.” I love him. I love her. I love them. I love you. Love is not about attitudes, but about actions, not about demeanor, but about doing right by you.

Doing right by you. That's why love is never irritable. I wouldn't want to hurt you. But that's why, too, when you are suffering, when you are being treated unfairly, I am irritated!