

Extravagant Love and All Saints
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
November 2, 2025
The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

Earlier this week, I received the newsletter to the House of Deputies of The Episcopal Church. (As the voting secretary, I'm still on the mailing list.) In her letter to the Church, the president of the house of deputies, Julia Ayala Harris, described this as a season of turning. Here in New England, we experience that sense of turning with vibrant colors and falling leaves, and a tiny bit of dread as we batten down the hatches for all that winter will bring.

President Ayala Harris was articulating the turning season in the rhythms of the Church, as new deputies are being elected, and our governance turns toward the work of our next General Convention. But she also talked about our turning outward - toward the world around us, as SNAP benefits are threatened, and economic insecurity swells across the country, and fear intensifies in immigrant communities across our nation.

How we turn toward the world as the people of God matters.

She writes:

In all of this, may our care be protective, not performative, born of love that shields rather than showcases, and rooted in the quiet strength of faithfulness.¹

That sentence has stayed with me all week. As we turn toward the world in all its brokenness, how will we respond?

This is where we meet Jesus in this morning's Gospel text from Luke. This is a portion of what we call Luke's sermon on the plain, less popular than the sermon on the mount, which is the version in Matthew's Gospel. In Luke's Gospel the blessings are followed by the woes, which Jesus then sums up by telling us, "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

And this last idea - expecting nothing in return - is the key to the whole sermon he's preaching. With these words, Jesus is challenging us to love, not as a strategy for gain, or a ploy to receive good treatment in return, or even (and perhaps worse) to be admired.² But rather to love for the sake of love itself, as we model the way we are loved by God.

Which is why President Ayala Harris's words resonate, when she says:

In all of this, may our care be protective, not performative, born of love that shields rather than showcases, and rooted in the quiet strength of faithfulness.³

I think that's what it looks like to live into this call of Jesus. Rather than performative care, Jesus calls us to a love that protects, provides, and shields those who are vulnerable. A love that expects nothing in return.

When Jesus says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you," he's not talking about an even exchange, he's talking about grace, about extravagant love, modeled after the love we've received from God. Which is in direct opposition to the economy of our lives, where we try to keep things even, a life of fair exchanges - 'I do this for you, you do this for me,' and when you do something for me, I'm quick to try and rebalance the scale in our relationship by reciprocating.

While there's nothing wrong with returning a favor, looking at our relationships through this lens of even exchange reduces love to a commodity.

To paraphrase one commentator:⁴

True love, by contrast, isn't caught up in an exchange; it expects nothing in return. It lends and does good to those who may never repay, and is kind to those who may never be kind in return. True love doesn't rest on reciprocity. To the extent that "fairness" depends on such things, true love isn't fair. It lives and moves beyond the sphere of fairness; it keeps no accounts. Precisely as a gift and not a payment, true love requires neither prior merit nor subsequent compensation. It's completely free.

....

And we call this this kind of love, this completely free, above-and-beyond, gratuitous giving "grace."

Friends, true love models God's extravagant grace. This is what Jesus means when he speaks the words of what we've come to call the Golden Rule: "Do to others what you would have done to you." Model the grace we have already received from God. Turn to the world with eyes of compassion, with empathy, with love. Doing to others as we would have done to us begins by looking beyond ourselves, and turning outward. It's about paying attention to those around us, beyond the circle of those we love, and those who are just like us. It's about turning our attention to those outside our regular, comfortable circles of connection. And noticing what others are experiencing, without judgment. With hearts willing to be bruised and overwhelmed, and hands willing to respond.

This Thursday night, handing out meals at the Allen Street door was miserable. It was raining and cold, and people were soaked and freezing. Lined up for meals, coming by in their cars, on their bikes, on foot ... picking up meals for family members, and for friends, and for the guy with the injured leg who camps out in front of the library.

It was both a great feeling to be able to hand people a warm, delicious meal. And a heart break to have to. Particularly knowing that things are just about to get worse, with the uncertainty surrounding SNAP benefits. But I'm glad I was there with Dan at the door, to smile and offer a warm meal, to greet people and look them in the eye, to be warm and welcoming, even for a moment. And it took me my whole ride home (to Hinsdale) to process the emotional toll of those encounters, and it should.

Because I know that what separates those on the inside of the door from those coming from the outside is a very thin margin. An accident of birth, a lot of luck, and the hard work of generations before us, and a million intangible, undeserved things. We each have our stories of how we got where we are, and upon whose shoulders we stand. None of us is completely self-made, we are interdependent and have been for generations, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and supported by communities.

My story includes my Indian great grandmother who stole away in the night after delivering a baby girl, knowing that if she had stayed in her village, her daughter would have been allowed to die, rather than waste resources on a girl. My great grandmother didn't survive the journey to her brother's protection in the city, but her daughter did. And she spent her life doing everything in her power to lift her children up to better lives. Her four children were wildly successful. Including my father, whose brilliant mind and hard work allowed him to become a physician and to move to the States for post-doctoral work.

So, rather than being born in a one-bedroom flat over the train station in Mumbai, I am the daughter of a naturalized American physician who served in the US military for more than 20 years, and I received all the benefits of that life. But not because I earned any of it. Yes, I've built a life through choices and hard work, (and some mistakes), but I started from a place of privilege. And it could have been very different.

Which brings us back to our Golden Rule. This idea of doing to others as we would have done to us acknowledges that we are more alike than we are different, that we are all in this together, all deserving of grace and love and care - which we've learned through God's immeasurable grace and love for us. Not so much a golden rule as golden encouragement to extravagant love - an invitation to a grace-full way of life.

Friends, it takes courage and empathy to turn toward the world around us and respond as children of God - with extravagant love and grace. Because it's overwhelming out there. According to Friday's Berkshire Eagle, 22,000 people in Berkshire County will go without their monthly SNAP benefits due to the ongoing federal government shutdown.⁵ It's in times like these that 'Do to others as you would have done to you,' becomes a call to action - to turn toward the community around us and respond as we are able.

An embarrassing story. When I was three, we went to India and I stayed with my grandmother, and saw people living on the sidewalks, in the stairwell of the apartment building, and extreme poverty that was difficult to process. At some point in the months following our return to the States, a parent mentioned that I should eat my food because there were starving children in India. And my three-and-a-half-year-old mind could picture them. I made a plan. A month or so after the comment had been made, I presented my parents with a shoe box - filled with all my desserts for the month - so they could send them to the starving children.

I didn't say it was a **good** plan, and I don't remember the mess, but I do remember the relief of having done something tangible. Certainly, 'Do to others as you would have done to you' - to an extreme, but I was three and a half. And that's what I had.

Friends, the question before us in this moment is: What do we have? How are we specifically poised to respond in our neighborhoods and communities?

Ken and I, and Jim and David, live in Hinsdale - and noted a Facebook post by the owner of the Hinsdale House of Pizza, inviting those in need of a meal to message him, and he would provide the family a meal. Jim contacted the town office; and got the information we need to support our tiny local food pantry. Note that food pantries can purchase more food per dollar wholesale than we can individually, so donations of funds go further than donations of food.

You'll notice that we have additional pieces of paper in our insert this week - one of those is a note from Bishop Fisher, asking us to turn our attention to those in need around us. On the back we've listed a few of the options in Pittsfield. You can support or volunteer to help at any number of sites, including the food pantries, and St. Stephen's Table, other meal sites in town. Senior services will also take a hit, as will the funding to help people afford to heat their homes this month. The Pittsfield Area Council of Congregations manages the congregation-based fuel fund. The list of needs is long, and I encourage us to find the place we feel called to respond.

Beloved ones, in the difficult days ahead, may we turn toward the world together, responding as we are able, and with love, so much extravagant love. Amen.

¹ Julia Ayala Harris, "Turning Toward What God Is Building Next," House of Deputies Newsletter, October 2025

² Graceful Life: SALT's Commentary for All Saints' Day, Oct 27, 2025, saltproject.org

³ Julia Ayala Harris, "Turning Toward What God Is Building Next," House of Deputies Newsletter, October 2025

⁴ Graceful Life: SALT's Commentary for All Saints' Day, Oct 27, 2025, saltproject.org

⁵ "Businesses step up with SNAP in peril," by Talia Lissauer, The Berkshire Eagle, October 31, 2025.