

Sermon

Sunday February 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM

Theme: Love Them

"I am convinced that the greatest thing you can do for someone; the most Jesus-like, most God-honoring thing, is to err on the side of loving them." A good friend brought that quote to my attention this week. It's from John Pavlovitz – a pastor and activist from North Carolina:

"I am convinced that the greatest thing you can do for someone; the most Jesus-like, most God-honoring thing, is to err on the side of loving them."

Today's Gospel reading is one of the most difficult for our modern sensibilities to digest.

Listen to this:

Love our enemies?

Do good to those who hate us?

Bless those who curse us?

Pray for those who abuse us?

Turn the other cheek?

If my coat is taken give my shirt as well?

Give to everyone who begs? Everyone?

Don't judge? Seriously?

These words from Jesus are a continuation of a teaching we started in the Gospel of Luke last week. It's known as the Sermon on the Plain. The Gospel of Matthew gives us a Sermon on the Mount; Luke gives us a Sermon on the Plain. There are striking similarities between the two. Last week we heard a series of blessings at the beginning of this teaching – much like the Beatitudes from Matthew.

In last week's gospel, those blessings were actually some revolutionary ideas. Happy are the poor, Jesus said, and woe to the rich. The people who Jesus called happy the rest of the world would regard as wretched. And those who the world sees as happy, Jesus says are miserable! Jesus is turning the values of the world upside down. Jesus isn't talking about the way things are – or how we see the world. Jesus is talking about how things are in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is telling us how things *SHOULD* be.

Today, Jesus continues to take all the common-sense things we know and throw them out the window. But instead of blessings (like last week) Jesus is now giving us instructions (to be gentle) and commands (to be a little more accurate).

Love my enemy? That doesn't even make sense, Jesus. By definition my enemy is someone I should be against. My enemy is wrong. My enemy hates me. My enemy certainly doesn't love me. Why – and how – am I supposed to love them? And for the sake of argument, we'll define our "enemy" as any who doesn't support us in everything we do, think, or say.

In the ancient Greek, there is more than one word for our single English word, "love." When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, the writer of the gospel used the Greek word for love of *agape*. This is not romantic love or the love you feel for your family. Agape roughly refers to a benevolence towards another person. One theologian put it like this: "It means that no matter what a person does to us we will never allow

ourselves to desire anything but their highest good: and we will deliberately go out of our way to be kind to them.”

However, in our society today, it seems everything is black and white: I am right. You are wrong. My way of behaving is good. Yours way is bad. My causes are worthy of attention and support. Yours support hate and should be abolished. My church vs. Your church. Well, you get the idea.

Jesus, how can we love our enemy when our enemy has no love for us? Turn the other cheek? Forget it! I'm going to strike back with words and actions! And if I were to give to everyone who begs I'd be the one begging in just a couple of weeks. And exactly what is this about expecting nothing in return? You have got to be kidding me, Jesus. If I do something nice for someone, they darn well better do something nice for me. That's the way world works. Quid pro quo. Right?

That's exactly the point. Jesus knows that is the way the world works. And he is telling us to change it. Jesus didn't say it would be easy. He didn't explain exactly how to make all of this happen. We're just supposed to do it.

I admit, I struggled with writing this sermon this week. It's a difficult scripture passage and I'm not really sure what to tell you about it. I don't like to stand up here and give a Bible book report. I'd like to have some helpful suggestions about how to make these words happen – how we can start to take action, love our enemies, and build the kingdom God here on earth.

I voiced these frustrations at home. My husband reads voraciously and shared an article from *The Federalist*, in which the Holy Spirit must have dropped in our laps. The article takes a circuitous journey to talk about how enemies both think they are always right. And what we are losing in our world used to be called “Christian charity.” Such charity never believes something you think is evil is actually good, but rather Christian charity takes into account that we all have sinned and fallen short. Everyone is selfish, prideful, and cruel and we are tempted to act on these motivations every day of our lives. Christian charity also opens us to the possibility that we just might be wrong about someone or something. What if we simply misunderstand our enemy?

The article references a quote by C. S. Lewis from his book, *Mere Christianity*:

*For a long time, I thought this a silly distinction: how could you hate what a person did and not hate the person? But years later it occurred to me that there was one person to whom I had been doing this all my life – myself. However, much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. And because I love myself, I was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did these things.*

So, I should love my enemy but not love what they did. Hmmm.

The problem with all of this is that it sounds eerily like an Evangelical phrase I have detested for many years: “Love the sinner; Hate the sin.” This phrase has been used as a slogan against homosexuality for years. Let's go back to that Greek word agape – a benevolent kind of love. Does someone who preaches against homosexuality truly love the person they call a sinner? Do they truly desire only the highest good for members of the LGBTQ community and will they deliberately go out of our way to be kind to them? Those are questions we need to answer about whatever prejudices or enemies we might have.

So where does this leave us? What is Christ talking about when he tells us to love our enemies?

I think what Jesus is telling us is to actually love the possibility that someone who does wrong – who does YOU wrong – can find the error of their ways, repent, and return to Christ. There are atrocities in history for which there is no explanation, no understanding, and would be incredibly difficult to truly forgive. The Holocaust comes to mind. But Jesus was so confident that sin could be forgiven he gave his life for us. All Jesus is asking of us is to believe in the possibility that everyone is worthy of redemption.

Unfortunately, a problem with our current cultural climate is that our tolerance for someone or something different is becoming smaller and smaller. If you aren't on the exact same page as me, then you are wrong. Our list of enemies is becoming larger with each passing day. Jesus is telling us to knock it off.

Perhaps Jesus is saying, "I'm going to give my life for you – all I ask in return is that you try not be such jerks to each other."

Later in today's passage Jesus tells us, "Do not judge and you won't be judged. Do not condemn and you won't be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." And, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." If you aren't a jerk to someone else, your life is going to be better.

I must add a huge disclaimer: This passage is often used to condone abuse. That is not what Jesus is saying. If you are being physically or emotionally abused you need to remove yourself from that situation. Loving your enemy does not mean you should be injured in any way. You cannot help build the kingdom of God if you are injured or fearful for your life. You can love and pray for your enemy from a safe place. Pray they will repent from their sin and return to God.

I encourage you to take the reading insert from your order of worship this morning, tuck it in your bag or a pocket. Take it home with you and read this Gospel from Luke whenever you have a free moment. Maybe use it a daily devotion this week. Every single sentence in this gospel is an instruction on how we are called to live our life. And they all flow out of the very first concept: love your enemies.

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