

Luke 6:27-38

Last time Jesus said some harsh things to his disciples, including blessings and curses. I will admit, they made me very uncomfortable. So this week, we pick up Jesus as he continues his Sermon on the Plain. He is aware that his words were difficult to hear. So he continues, for those of you **still** listening:

²⁷"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your father is merciful.

³⁷"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Jesus' admonition to love our enemies seems like an impossible challenge in our suspicious and divided society. We are to love our enemies, those we know and those we don't really know. Do you have an enemies list? I didn't think I did, but a few people in my past fit the bill. When I think of them, I hear the lyrics of an old song by Simon and Garfunkel called "The Boxer". It goes:

In the clearing stands a boxer
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of every glove that laid him down
And cut him 'til he cried out
In his anger and his shame

I remember those hurts that cut me deeply, and Jesus tells me I must love those folks and pray for them.

And not a prayer like many of the Psalms we are studying in Bible Study, prayers wanting/celebrating retribution like Psalm 9:

³ My enemies turn back;

they stumble and perish before you.

⁴ For you have upheld my right and my cause,

sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.

⁵ You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked;

you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.

⁶ Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies,

you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished.

But we are to love them and pray for their well-being. We are to ask God that they may receive not punishment but blessings. This is tough to pray for those who hurt you. I know that abuse is a loaded word and brings child abuse and domestic violence to mind. This is not the kind of abuse Jesus is talking about. We may or may not **ever** reach the point of praying for those kinds of abusers. Nor is it a call for those suffering to be encouraged to stay in abusive relationships. That is perilous, and I hope we have grown beyond that kind of harmful advice.

In the midst of this command to love, Jesus gives us the Golden Rule:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” We have known it from our childhood.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” as I learned it. And it is not unique to him.

In Judaism, there is a version that tells of a young man who comes to Rabbi Shammai saying, “I will convert if you can teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai had no patience for the ridiculous and disrespectful request and chased him out.

Undaunted, the fellow then visited Shammai's colleague, Hillel, with the same request. Hillel instructed him, "Whatever is hateful and distasteful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go learn."

And we know it occurs in many other faiths as well. A few are from:

Buddhism ~ “Do not offend others as you would not want to be offended.”

Islam, Prophet Muhammad ~ “None of you are true believers until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.”

Confucianism ~ “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

Sikhs ~ "I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all."

Taoism ~ "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss."

Jainism ~ "One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated."

Baha'i Faith ~ "And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou chooseth for thyself."

This Golden Rule, in all its forms, is something we should all aspire to. It is a noble goal. And it is universal, not just Christian.

But there is more. For Jesus, the Golden Rule is how we treat all people and even applies when they treat us poorly. It is to treat them well despite their wronging us. It's where Jesus calls us to go beyond a religion of reciprocity. We are just doing good to the ones we know will be good to us. We are to grow into a faith that is like God's way. We are to take that step of faith. It is not only to be kind just to the people we like and the people it is easy to love. Our love is modeled on God's way of being merciful even to the ungrateful and the wicked. We must go beyond returning good for good and move to even return good for evil. And this is so hard.

So what does it look like? It is like the Bible Story of Joseph. Now Joseph comes from a highly dysfunctional family that has been so for several generations.

Many of you remember that story from Sunday School. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son and Joseph was a little snooty. He would tell his brothers of his dreams, where they would all bow down to him. We know that didn't go over well.

Then Daddy gave him the famous coat. So one day, Jacob sent him out to find his brothers. They were so angry with him that they were going to kill him, but instead, they sold him into slavery in Egypt. Then they told Daddy Jacob he had been killed by a wild beast. They had dipped his famous coat in blood and showed it to Jacob. He was beyond comfort.

But in slavery, Joseph prospered and was put in charge of a significant household belonging to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard, and everything he did for his master prospered. However, the master's wife had eyes for Joseph, and when Joseph refused her, she accused him to her husband, and he was thrown in jail.

There, too, he prospered. He was put in charge of the prisoners. In prison, he interprets dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer, telling him he will thrive and Pharaoh's baker telling him he

will be hanged. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him, but he forgets. So Joseph remains in prison until Pharaoh is plagued by dreams and Joseph is remembered and sent for.

Joseph interprets his dreams, tells him a famine is coming and the Pharaoh must make preparations. Joseph ends up being put in charge of the plan, which of course, is wildly successful.

Meanwhile, back home, the famine is terrible. So Jacob sends his sons to buy food. There, ironically, they kneel before Joseph.

Joseph secretly returns the money they paid and still gives them food through some razzle-dazzle. Still, he has set a condition that Benjamin, Jacob's youngest, come back. To ensure it, he keeps one of the brothers till they return.

The remaining brothers returned to their father and told him all that had transpired in Egypt. They also discovered that their money sacks still had money in them. They were dismayed. Would they be accused of stealing?

Then they informed their father that the Vizier (who is really Joseph) demanded that Benjamin be brought before him to show that they were honest men. Jacob became greatly distressed that now he would lose his other beloved son. But he is persuaded to let Benjamin join them.

They are well received, given more grain, and sent home, except Joseph has planted his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The soldiers come and find it in Benjamin's sack. Is this the revenge Joseph had planned?

Alone with his family, it was time for the big reveal. Then he revealed himself as their brother, Joseph. The brothers were frozen and could not utter a word. Would he exact revenge? He brought them closer and relayed to them the events that had happened and told them **not to fear**, that **what they had meant for evil, God had meant for good**. Then he commanded them to go and bring their father and his entire household into Egypt to live because there were five more years of famine left.

It is a treasured story, and it speaks of what Jesus is trying to teach. It applies the Golden Rule of generous love to the very people that betrayed him. Instead of vengeance, Joseph's brothers receive forgiveness and blessing.

That is the kind of love God has for us. Jesus reminds us saying that it is the kind of love God has for all people, including the wicked and ungrateful, and that is the kind of love we are to have for others - a merciful, forgiving love rather than a judgmental outlook.

But this is not just a bible story; it's a real-life story. In his book "The Lord's Prayer", Adam Hamilton tells the story of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish. He was born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza. He became an obstetrician and delivered many babies, both Palestinian and Israeli. In 2009 an Israeli tank shelled his house and killed three of his daughters and his niece. Despite an attempted coverup by Israel, he did not issue a cry for vengeance; he came

to the place where he dedicated his life to working for peace between Palestinians and Israelis. He wanted to honor his daughters and niece by bringing a blessing out of tragedy. Hamilton quotes him saying, "We must work for justice, but with what? A bullet? That is an instrument of the weak. No, with kindness, we will work for peace and justice."

I don't know if I could do what he did.

It's like Nelson Mandela. When Nelson Mandela arrived on Robben Island at dawn on a frigid, rainy morning in July 1964, it was clear to the Afrikaner prison officials that he commanded great respect among the inmates. He was a natural leader of the men. But, as a consequence, they singled him out for punishment and humiliation.

Other prisoners would later describe how guards, a few years into his incarceration, ordered him to dig and then climb into a grave-shaped trench in the prison yard. Mr. Mandela must have wondered whether this was the end. Then, as he lay in the dirt, they unzipped their trousers and urinated on him.

Almost three decades he languished in prison, a perfect time for hatred, bitterness, and revenge to develop, but instead, out came forgiveness and reconciliation.

Nowhere is it more apparent than this incident. Many years later, an aide asked Mr. Mandela to list people he wished to invite to his inauguration dinner as president of South Africa. Mr. Mandela is said to have only insisted on a former jailer with whom he had developed a relationship.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/nelson-mandela/mandelas-miraculous-capacity-for-forgiveness-a-carefully-calibrated-strategy/article548192/>

Again, a giant of a person with love in his heart. It's like us when we forgive a deep wound.

Most of us don't have these kinds of traumatic events in our life, but there are areas we have been hurt and need to forgive with the mercy that comes from beyond us. God's mercy is what we need. When I identified a few people on my enemy list, it did not mean I forgot, but I freed myself from a prison I had built. My anger did not do anything to them, but it hurt me and made me bitter. I needed to release the hurt I could.

In doing this, we don't forgive, forget, or put ourselves at their disposal again, but we do heal ourselves, the healing we all need.

I think I have told you about one of my favorite cartoons I found in a magazine. It shows a woman holding a monster closely, and the caption is, "Nursing a grudge." We, too, feed that soul-devouring monster if we refuse to heed the call to stop holding a grudge.

As Mandela said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies." Or as Ann Lamott puts it, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

When we heed the call to, “Be merciful, just as your father is compassionate, we give new life to our spirits.” It is what we pray for each week in the Lord's prayer. As we pray “as we forgive our debtors”. I know it is risky, but Jesus will help us. This forgiving won't change our past, but it will change our future.

As Maya Angelou says, “It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive everybody.”