Jesus Calls His Followers to Love Their Enemies
Luke 6:27-38
Epiphany 7, Year C February 23, 2025
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Good morning, friends, and welcome as we wrap up the month of February. You'll recall that last week we heard Jesus teaching and healing "a great multitude of people" (6:17) who had come from around the region. We ended last week's discussion of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain with four "woes" (6:24-26), which paralleled four "blessings" (6:20-23).

Today, we pick up Jesus' teaching at verse 27. Once again, those who created the lectionary decided to break one story in half. Luke 6:27 begins with the word "but." Now the group before him is not referred to as a "multitude," but instead, as to "you that listen." Some people are obviously paying close attention to what Jesus has to say. And we need to do that too.

Jesus begins to speak about love. Much as we might wish that he were talking about "roses are red, violets are blue" kind of love, he's really calling us to love our enemies. These aren't just people with whom we have a petty squabble. No, he is teaching us to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (6:27-28). As followers of Christ we are called to take all of these positive actions in dealing with those who have somehow harmed us.

Wow! That's a mighty tall order! Remember last week's example of the Aucas who couldn't understand why missionaries who had guns didn't kill their attackers? While the world-at-large may strike back, Jesus' disciples are called and expected to act differently. We are to live as citizens of the kingdom of God, which means that our lives reflect the love and ethics of God, not those of the world. To live in a way that is contrary to our culture is difficult. I don't know of anyone who does that perfectly, but I do know people who try. And their lives are different because of their countercultural stance. The five missionaries we met last week, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, the biblical deacon Stephen who was martyred for his testimony, and many others all tried to live as Jesus commanded us. And I assume we all know at least one person who may not be famous but who tries hard to live as a faithful disciple by loving enemies.

Jesus isn't just talking about people who may say something nasty about us. Verses 29-30 show us how to respond when people are seeking

to hurt us in some way. No one wants to be punched in the face, but if that happens we are to turn the other cheek. I can't say what Jesus expected to happen in this situation, but I do imagine that the bad actor would be brought up short by someone who did not fight back. Jesus also tells his followers to give their shirt to the one who takes their coat. People needed their coats, which were used as blankets at night, so to have that taken away would be very serious. But to give one's shirt as well is going far over and above what would have been expected in Jesus' day—or ours for that matter. Whereas in the ancient world, and ours as well, the notion of "tit for tat," or "I'll scratch your back and you'll scratch mine" seemed to be the way things worked, Jesus is setting forth an entirely new way of viewing the world. We are to go over and above, to do what is asked of us and more. And what we give, we are to give freely.

This idea carries over to verse 30 where we're told to "give to everyone who begs from you." Does Jesus really mean "everyone" who tries to get money from me? Well, yes, that's what he says. I know the arguments about not wanting to enable people. And I've seen people, particularly in urban areas, who essentially have their own corners staked out and will likely be there at certain times with hat in hand. And I know the stories about helping addicts get their drugs or alcohol. But having taught in the inner city of Baltimore, I've had to learn ways to help folks who are created in the image of God, just as I am. I didn't have unlimited funds, of course, but I could put a few dollars in my pocket to give to someone who was begging. Craig and I could also take our church youth group to an inner city church on occasion to serve lunch, which helped both those who needed food and those who had plenty to recognize the needs of others. I wish I had some way to solve the poverty situation, as well as the homelessness and food insecurity that goes along with that. But truth be told, I don't. I can do very little. But what I am saying is that like the boy who threw however many starfish he could back into the ocean, we can't save everyone, but as Christians we can do the best we can for those whose paths cross ours. And, not incidentally, no matter what we do or give, we are not to ask for anything in return (6:30). Why? It's helpful to remember that we are stewards of God's bounty, not owners of anything, for the world is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). And as to the argument that some people don't *deserve* any kind of assistance, that's weak, because none of us deserves the mercy and salvation of God. These are gifts freely and graciously given. We are called to give to people because they *need* something, not because they *deserve* it. That's the way God operates.

In Luke 6:32, Jesus reminds us that according to the ways of the world,

we may love those who love us. But that doesn't mean much, since "even sinners do the same" (6:32). Likewise, if we do good to those who do good to us, there is no credit to be had (6:33). And once again, if we lend money to someone we expect to repay us, that's nothing more than any sinner would do (6:34).

Let's consider in more detail what it means to be an enemy. Merriam-Webster defines "enemy" in these three ways:

* one that is antagonistic to another, *especially***:** one seeking to injure, overthrow, or confound an opponent;

* something harmful or deadly

***** a military adversary; a hostile unit or force.

Notice that an "enemy" can be singular; for example, one person who has tried to cause you harm. But it can also represent a group of people that someone (or, more probably, a group or nation) views as hostile.

So, as Jesus is teaching us to love our enemies, he is talking in broad terms. This isn't just about the neighbor whose dog uses our garden as a potty. The enemy could be an entire group that we consider hostile. Let's be honest: For some folks, sadly even including Christians, an individual or group of people who doesn't look like them, talk like them, eat similar kinds of foods, have a different sexual orientation, or a different ethnic background can easily be considered an enemy. Whether this individual or group has done anything to earn the label of "enemy" or not, there are those who will want such people out of their lives and away from them. Two common ways to get rid of such folks are deportation and incarceration.

But is this what Jesus taught us to do? I think not. Please hear me: I'm not talking about letting violent criminals walk the streets so that they can strike again. Nor am I talking about excusing the behaviors of those who have acted fraudulently or as thieves. If one has committed a crime and been found guilty by a jury of peers, and had that verdict held up after appeal, then the perpetrator needs to be punished accordingly.

Remember, though, that even if someone has harmed another and needs to be punished, Jesus still calls us to embrace such individuals and offer unconditional love and forgiveness, although their crime cannot be excused. Even if we ourselves have not committed crimes that are worthy of a jail sentence, I imagine that we all have said or done something at some point to hurt, perhaps betray, someone. What can we do to make amends if we are the guilty party? How can we offer forgiveness if we are the one who has been harmed? Let me share with you what I find to be an amazing story.

In *The Grace of Giving*, Stephen Olford tells of a Baptist pastor

during the American Revolution, Peter Miller, who lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the friendship of George Washington. In Ephrata also lived Michael Wittman, an evil-minded sort who did all he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor.

"No, Peter," General Washington said. "I cannot grant you the life of your friend."

"My friend!" exclaimed the old preacher. "He's the bitterest enemy I have."

"What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did.

Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata--no longer an enemy but a friend.

I don't know the rest of the story, but I imagine that Michael Wittman began to take a look, or perhaps take a harder look, at the Jesus who would prompt Pastor Peter to take such loving, gracious action to save someone who had treated him so terribly. Pastor Peter was definitely opening wide the door of the church and extending the opportunity for a relationship with Jesus to traitor Wittman.

Let's bring this principle of relating to enemies by offering unconditional love and forgiveness closer to home. We can do that by looking at Jesus' illustration in Luke 6:37-38. These verses envision a merchant selling grain in a marketplace. A buyer comes along, carrying a container to purchase grain. Many, perhaps most, merchants, would fill the container to the top and let that be it. A generous merchant, however, fills the container and shakes it down, causing some of the grain to spill into the buyer's lap. What a generous portion of grain! Interesting picture, but what is Jesus trying to tell us about God and loving our enemies?

Several points come to mind. For example, God's grace is abundant, providing blessings and grace to those who follow the teachings of Jesus. In addition, when we love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who abuse and mistreat us, we are acting in ways that reflect the very nature of God. Our actions show forth God's grace and mercy.

There is one other verse (6:31) in today's passage that we have not yet discussed, though I'm sure it's very familiar to all of you: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." I recently read an interpretation of the Golden Rule that is different from the one we normally hear. That

interpretation suggests that we are to do to others what we think God would want us to do.

Well, just as Jesus had told Peter to set out into deep waters, we've been in deep waters ourselves today. Wouldn't it just be much easier if we could live the way the rest of the world lives? We could hate our enemies, retaliate against those who may speak ill of us, and do all we can to knock the safety net out from under someone we consider an enemy. Yes, certain people can and will do these things, but they don't meet Jesus' expectations for his followers. You and I cannot judge them, but Jesus can. All we can do is try to live according to his teachings in the best way that we can.

I hope today's message has prompted you to think about how you can respond to enemies in a Christ-like way. The best way, of course, if to forgive and love the person unconditionally, just as Jesus would. But let's be honest: We're not all there yet. I know I'm not. So, in the meantime, may I suggest a way to poke your enemy without causing serious damage. The Baltimore Zoo is sponsoring a fundraiser that you may find useful for channeling your negative feelings toward an enemy. For different levels of giving, you will receive a certificate indicating that elephant poo has been added in your enemy's name to a dung pile that will help with conservation efforts at the zoo. Perhaps picturing this pile in your mind's eye will give you a chuckle, rather than raise your hackles in anger when you think of this person.

So what will you do about all that we've discussed today? Allow me to make a suggestion. First, write down the names of any folks who you perceive as enemies. Recall what happened to make you feel this way. Pray for these people, and pray for yourself, asking God to give you a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. If possible, contact this person and arrange to meet so that you can do whatever is possible to repair the relationship. While you're talking, let this person know that the tent of God's love spreads over everyone, including them! Love, Nan