

“Blessing When It’s Tough!”
C Epiphany Seven; Luke 6:27-38
February 17, 2019; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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Luke 6:27-38 The Message (MSG)

²⁷⁻³⁰ “To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

³¹⁻³⁴ “Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them!* If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that’s charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

³⁵⁻³⁶ “I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us,

generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.

³⁷⁻³⁸ “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don’t condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you’ll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

I. LOVE THOSE ENEMIES

²⁷ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

²⁷⁻³⁰ “To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person.

Is it a command or a promise? How do we “do” this hard instruction of Jesus? Are we “ready for the truth?” Ready to listen with fresh ears and take a fresh run at this seemingly impossible guidance –

something we've heard all our lives but never really figured out how to carry out?

II. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. – 3 things

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a wonderful sermon on this passage, entitled, “Loving Your Enemies.”

He makes some excellent points about this passage and this command that he says is often dismissed (probably by preachers more than anyone!) with the excuse that: “Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth.”

I love that! Way to “write off Jesus” when the teachings get tough!

1. We begin to love our enemies by first analyzing *ourselves*.

King says people *aren't* going to like us. It's just that simple. It might be as basic as not liking what we wear or what we drive or how we make decisions that affect them. Or even that don't!

There might just be something in us that arouses a hate response in others. And, self-reflection and taking an honest look inside is an important place to start in trying to love our enemy. Not that you should change to please them, but by gaining understanding of what triggers that reaction in them, you can better understand how to love them and work toward reconciliation.

Jesus says similarly: “turn it around” – look in the mirror:

³¹⁻³⁴ “Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them!*”

2. Discover the element of good in the enemy

Imago Dei – made in the image of God are we! And so are you! And you! And every other person – whether we like them or not! Whether we consider them friends or enemies.

King puts it this way: “within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When you come to the point that you look in the face of every person (including yourself, I would add!) and see deep down within the “image of God,” you begin to love *in spite of*. No matter what they do, you see God's image there... As you seek to hate your enemy, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude.”

3. When you have the opportunity to defeat—don't!

King says in order to resist the temptation to defeat your adversary when given the chance, that you have to understand love in the biblical sense.

“Love is not this sentimental something that we talk about. It is not merely emotional. Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its

great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil *systems*. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system you *love*, but you seek to defeat the system.”

We’ll get to more on that in Jesus’ next line about “turn the other cheek.”

Love in the biblical sense is *not* sentimental (well, other than on Valentine’s Day!) it is hard and active and beyond anything we can really comprehend.

Scripture has many kinds of love, but this one here is Agape.

“Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all. It seeks nothing in return. It is overflowing; the love of God working in our lives. And when you rise to love on this level, you being to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them.” (Even if the worst person you’ve ever seen!)

Jesus does not say, “Like your enemy.” Or “like what they do, or how they behave, or how they treat me or others. It doesn’t say, “Like their attitudes or values that go completely against yours and you believe are wrong.” *Love* is greater than *like*.

David Ewert suggests we make it an active verb. We “*agape* others when we hold a whole-hearted, unconditional desire for their well-being *even if* we don't like them. Even if we oppose some of their behaviors. Even if we need to speak against some of what they stand for.

“But if you *agape* your enemies, the ways you express your dislike and opposition will always also express your total desiring of their well-being.” (Ewert)

III. TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

So, that’s Jesus first verse and command here. “Love your enemies.” And then he’s right into a whole ‘nother can of worms. It sounds like Jesus is giving examples for how to “lay down and take it” when your enemy seeks to do you harm. But, again, we must look at these sayings with fresh eyes and ears.

Point #1: Jesus is NOT telling his followers to be a doormat! This is not about accepting violence, nor refusing to stand up to it. It’s an act of resistance and Jesus was encouraging this.

We as Christians have missed that part of the equation for a LONG time! Churches have told people over and over, and most painfully women and children and other victims of domestic violence, to “turn the other cheek” in ways to allow the abuse to continue unchecked.

Jesus has just gotten done saying we should love our enemy, when he jumps into this “tough love” set of examples. It’s a complex matter—never to be taken lightly, and never black and white. But we have interpreted it out of context over the years to our peril.

Jesus is NOT saying, “Love your enemies—for example, if someone strikes you on one cheek, you

just turn the other cheek and let them have *at* you. Or, if they steal your coat, you just strip down to your skivvies and give them your shirt too. Cuz that's the Christian thing to do. Nope!

Let's unpack that a little. I'll give a brief explanation here of this passage in its historical and social context, and then include a written article on the bulletin board or in the printed and website version of the sermon if you want to know more. You know, I always encourage homework! We should always study further to understand more fully the teachings of Jesus and the bible.

A. Getting Cheeky

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Masters were the only ones "allowed" to slap someone on the cheek. And that someone would be a slave or servant – usually. There was a strict protocol to this, and it was an assertion of power and status—to remind someone who is boss and in control. It was *not* something "just anyone" did.

It was done with the back of the right hand across the right cheek of the one being slapped. The Master had to follow this exact procedure to keep face, and the servant was to obediently stand facing the master and accept the abuse. Only the right cheek with only the back of the right hand.

So, imagine that you've just been slapped on the right cheek and you silently turn your head and put your left

cheek forward. It appears that you are being doubly subservient, but in fact, you are putting the Master in a predicament. For he can't really strike your *left* cheek with the *back* of his *right* hand. You've just rendered him powerless! And embarrassed and ashamed to boot.

The Master's choices at this point are all three unacceptable, if he's trying to save face and protect his honor:

- a) Hit again with the palm of the hand instead of the back— against the rules
- b) Hit again with the left hand instead of the right— again, not permitted.
- c) Walk away – definitely admitting defeat and giving away his power and control.

I know this is a little hard to imagine without doing a demo right here. But that's something you can all try out at coffee hour, or at home—if you promise to be nice to each other!

In a nutshell, this admonition by Jesus to "turn the other cheek" is a call to non-violent resistance. To disarm the power of the abuser and oppressor with a subtle turning of the tables and upset of the social protocols. So that the tide is bucked and better behavior can break forth.

The other two examples are similar. But we don't "get them" if we don't know the background and the social

norms and rules of that place and time. One of the huge dangers of take scripture out of context and not doing our homework.

B. Sue and take your coat

“If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”

First off, and most important to note: people didn't just sue each other like we do in our society. Peasants did not sue each other. They had nothing to sue for! Lawsuits were about the privileged abusing the poor.

Peasants quite literally owned the clothes on their backs. So, if someone in power over you took your coat, your only choice was to run around in your underwear (cloak), OR, offer your underwear as well, and then run around naked and make *him* explain why!

Nakedness was also a form of resistance – embarrassing to the oppressor if the onlookers knew why and you weren't too uncomfortable with your exposed state. (I do wonder if Jesus had a pretty good sense of humor!)

C. Walk a Mile

Jesus: and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Again, this wasn't about equals going out for a hike and maybe challenging each other to go just one more mile and summit the mountain. It was about oppression. A Soldier in those days was allowed to conscript a civilian to carry his pack, but *only* for a mile. And this wouldn't just make for a longer and more strenuous

jaunt for the civilian, maybe building up his muscles a little better so he wouldn't have to go to the gym.

If an innocent person, living hand-to-mouth were grabbed and made to walk a mile with a heavy pack, then he'd have to walk back home that mile as well and miss that day's labor and thus, his family would go hungry for that whole day.

If the person offered to “double or nothing” and walk two miles instead, this would expose the unjust situation – not unlike a hunger strike. It would bring shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing.

IV. LOVING ENEMIES & RESISTANCE

So, what does this all mean? And why does Jesus put all these complex teaching and seeming mixed messages together in one lesson? Because, it's *always both/and*.

Love your enemies *and* resist evil – in yourself and in others. *Don't* lie down and accept violence, abuse, or mistreatment – for yourself or for others.

There are ways to love and respect even those most opposed to you, *and* not to turn a blind eye or a numb cheek to violence and suffering. We don't have to *choose* between loving our enemy and standing up for what's right. It's *not* an either/or. Few things are.

Jesus was not uttering simplistic, impossible platitudes, like those who espouse “love as the answer” are often accused of. Jesus was no snowflake! (As the term is used pejoratively.)

Jesus does *not* downplay the reality of evil, violence, oppression and discrimination. And, he *never* counsels us to accept it as “the way things are” or excuse it. Quite the opposite, he calls us to *resist*, stand up to evil, confront it, stand up for those who need support and protection and solidarity.

I would submit that he would also say, “loving your enemy means not allowing them to stay stuck in their perpetuation of wrong without challenging them with tough love” just as we would a friend we saw going down a harmful path.

And, that applies to ourselves as well. Loving our enemy *also* means loving ourselves whenever we are our own worst enemy. Confronting that within ourselves that is harmful. Resisting non-violently the acts that lead to destruction and despair – whether caused by us or those around us. Resistance and confrontation may be the most loving acts we ever make.

MLK concludes with just that message—there are ways to resist oppression that are open to us all. Violence is *not* the answer. Nor is acquiescing or giving in to the mistreatment. Turning the other cheek in the ways it’s traditionally been understood and lying down like a doormat is *not* the answer, either.

Gathering together in non-violent ways for resistance based on the principle of love is one possibility. “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world. We will be able to

make humankind better. Love is the only way. Jesus discovered that.”

“I love you. I would rather die than hate you. I am foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transform. And then we will be in God’s Kingdom.”

“You cannot force someone to comprehend a message that they are not ready to receive. Still, you must never underestimate the power of planting a seed.” (anonymous)

How then, do we love our enemies, or deal with relationships that are strained and people that give us a hard time and vice versa? All of these things and more! Put simply by Jesus in modern terms for us:

Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person

Respond with the energies of prayer! Choose Blessings instead of curses. Look for the Imago Dei in every person and see with the eyes of Christ. “The Christ in me greets the Christ in you.” (Celtic blessing)

A Blessing Prayer by Martin Luther King:

**May we love You with all our hearts,
souls and minds.**

**May we love our neighbors as we love ourselves,
even our enemy neighbors.**

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.

Turn The Other Cheek – Nonviolent Resistance To Violence

Publicly Expose and Mock Injustice

Matthew 5:38-41 has a tragic history of poor translations and even worse interpretations.

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

This passage is NOT recommending becoming a doormat; nor does it tolerate domestic violence.

First of all, the translation, "Do not resist an evildoer" fails to convey the full meaning of the underlying Greek. It would be better translated as, "Do not violently resist an evildoer." Thus the teaching is primarily about non-violence. It is *not* about acquiescing to evil.

Jesus then goes on to offer three quick examples of how to non-violently resist an evildoer - in fact, of how to **publicly shame and mock an evildoer**.

These passages are tragically mis-interpreted because we have forgotten the original society in which Jesus gave these teachings. When Jesus says, "If anyone ..." he and his listeners knew instantly and exactly who that "anyone" was. The behaviours Jesus describes - slapping the right cheek; suing; forcing to go a mile - were not the kind of things "anyone" could do. They were the kind of things only a privileged few could do - and did - to the crowds who were listening to Jesus.

Slapping the right cheek.

This was done by Masters to their servants and slaves. It was always done by hitting with the back of the right hand across the right cheek.

The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. This is not about random violence or fighting among friends or enemies. It is about rank, privilege and power.

And to preserve one's honor - one's public standing - it is crucial everything must be done according to the socially accepted protocols. The slave must obediently stand facing you without external coercion. You must strike only the right cheek; and only with the back of the right hand. Any variation on this would demonstrate that you were not in control; would be a public loss of face.

Now imagine your overlord has just slapped you on your right cheek, and without saying a word you silently turn your head to expose your left cheek. It appears that you are becoming doubly subservient; doubly accepting your master's authority over you. But you are actually rendering your master powerless!

Turning your head hides your right cheek and presents your left cheek. But the angle of your head will be such that the master can see, but cannot strike your left cheek with the back of his right hand. Try this with a friend and you'll see what happens.

Doing this would publicly expose the master to shame and ridicule. You would appear to be meek and servile; obediently waiting for a second blow. But the Master would be totally helpless. His only options would be to hit you with the palm of his right hand, or use his left hand, or walk away. All three would cause him to lose face.

Sue you.

Peasants did not sue one another. Again this is about the privileged abusing the poor.

Since peasants quite literally only owned the clothes on their backs, being sued for your coat was being sued for the only thing you owned - except for your underwear! Which is what a "cloak" means.

Being seen in your underwear is shameful for you. So why not publicly expose the shame which allows someone with wealth and privilege to take away the only thing a poor person owns by going naked!

Give him your underwear. Let him explain why you are naked.

Forced to go a mile.

Soldiers were allowed to conscript civilians to carry their packs, but only for a mile.

However, this was no minor inconvenience for anyone who worked and fed their family day by day. Walking a mile with a heavy pack and then back again would mean missing that day's labour, and therefore that day's food for the family.

Offering to go a second mile publicly exposes the unjust hardship of being forced to go even one mile, but does so in a way that seems to cooperate while at the same time brings shame and ridicule on the ones doing the forcing. (David Ewart, www.holytextures.com.)