

Title: Seriously? Loving Your Enemies
Text: Luke 6:27-36
Date: February 24, 2019

Last week we took a broad view of The Sermon on The Plain, Luke's version of what most people know as The Sermon on The Mount. We took a broad view of what Luke cast as Blessings and Woes. Amongst other things, I hoped to free us from any misconception that blessings needed to be earned by adjusting our attitudes. If anything, I tried to impress upon you that looking at those whom Jesus calls "blessed" tells us more about Jesus, than those we call blessed.

Today's text continues directly from where we dropped off last week. While last week we took a broad view of things, this week I want to zoom in and focus all of our attention on this single exhortation to "Love your enemies." I confess that there is a sense in which I feel burdened to "get it right" - to clarify this core Christian teaching. My deep desire is to zoom in until we "get it."

I know I have my work cut out for me. If I were to preach on the five steps to successful living, I know some of you will start taking notes. However, when preaching on "loving your enemies," I suspect some of you will think "how naïve." Some of you will think of this as an aspirational fantasy. Yet Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "**Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization.**" Now that's a strong statement!

Indeed, I was quite pleased when I discovered a sermon that Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this topic in 1957. Unfortunately, I don't think it would be as simple as reading his sermon to you. For one, it is three times longer than the sermons you are used to hearing here! And though he makes many excellent points, somehow his thought process struck me as being from a different era. I did, however, want to steal a phrase he used. A couple of times he insisted that Jesus "wasn't playing" when he uttered this command.

People get nervous about this notion because they think that if you are going to love your enemies, then you are going to cave to them, that you are inviting martyrdom, that you are opening yourself up to psychological and moral absurdity, that you will condone the aggressor. I contend that all this represents a serious misunderstanding.

Jesus' teaching is actually reflective of a long tradition found in Eastern psychologies in general, and Buddhist teaching specifically – not to mention Christian monastic traditions – of overcoming bitterness and vengefulness. It is actually taking things a step further than Moses did when he introduced the principal of "**an eye for eye, and a tooth for a tooth,**" which was originally a principal of restraint – as opposed to rampant vengefulness, such as taking a life for a tooth. Like Jesus, the Buddha also moved things beyond a tribal attitude when he taught "**Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love; this is an eternal truth Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good.**" Dhammapada 1.5 & 17.3

Part of the confusion stems from our more shallow understanding of the word "love," Many of you have heard that in the Greek New Testament there were different words used for love. **C. S. Lewis wrote an insightful book entitled "The Four Loves."** While we might casually say, "I love ice cream," or "I love my cousins," or "I love my spouse," in Greek there are different words for each of those types of love. We get hung up with the idea of "loving our enemy" because we then think we have to send them a Valentine's card.

Some of you know that Jesus uses the word *agape* when exhorting us to love our enemies. To make it clear, you can have this kind of spiritual love for someone that you don't even like. *Agape* love seeks nothing in return, and is a reflection of the kind of unconditional love that God has for all . . . even the worst person you might imagine. Once you understand this, you can make sense out of the words of David Steindl-Rast who says, **"To love our enemies does not mean that we suddenly become their friends. If it is our enemies we are to love, they must remain enemies. Unless you have enemies, you cannot love them."**

Robert Thurman, Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, explains that in Asian psychological terms love means to wish happiness for the beloved. The reason someone is your enemy is because they think that you are preventing their happiness – somehow you have something they want, or you are in their way. The world isn't big enough for the both of you, and so they are going to be your enemy. So then loving your enemies actually becomes practical advice.

He mentions how people tried to talk Martin Luther King out of loving their enemies. King insisted, however, that hating their enemies was too big a burden to bear, even though they opposed them. Hating them was a waste of their energy. You have already been hurt by your enemy, but if you then go around nursing vindictiveness you are only hurting yourself. Alternatively, you can oppose your enemy with tough love, or fierce compassion. When they sense you are doing it because you want their betterment, that changes things. There is a better chance that they will listen to you if they don't feel hatred or a destructive vibration coming through you towards them.

A couple of years ago I read an article on the political thrill of having an enemy. This is something we have to watch out for since this can twist the psyche of even good Christians. Though the article started by talking about the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the words started to sound strangely familiar when it said that, **"To have an authoritarian personality as your president is to live a different kind of life."** As Andrew Sullivan explains, the dictator **"begins to permeate your psyche and soul; he dominates every news cycle and issues pronouncements—each one shocking and destabilizing—round the clock. He delights in constantly provoking and surprising you, so that his monstrous ego can be perennially fed."** This applies to "Dear Leaders," but it can also apply to our own president. On the surface this sounds unappealing, but, on an either a conscious or subconscious level, many Americans, even vociferous Trump opponents, strangely seem to *like* it. Could it be that this seemingly impossible call to love our enemies might just be necessary to save our souls? Jesus "wasn't playing" when he uttered this command.

Reflecting on this high call to love, Cory Booker said, **"We seem to have become a country where the highest thing we're reaching for is tolerance. When you say "bipartisan," you're really saying, "Hey we're going to tolerate each other." Go home and tell somebody that you live with, or your neighbor, "I tolerate you."** That's not a high aspiration.

One interviewer put the question to him point blank: **"Can you find love for Donald Trump?"** Booker responded by saying, **"When I gave a speech at the convention, Trump tweeted something really mean about me, veiledly dark. You know, almost a weird kind of attack on me. Then next morning, I'm out with Chris Cuomo on CNN and he puts up the tweet. I think he was trying to get a rise out of me. He goes, "What do you have to say to Donald Trump?" I said, "I love you Donald Trump. I don't want you to be my president; I'm going to work very hard against you. But I'm never going to let you twist me and drag me down so low as to hate you."**

What can we do to develop our sense of compassion? Practically speaking, how can we go about learning to love our enemies? The contemplative David Steindl-Rast has some practical suggestions that I would like to read to you that were written far outside the realm of our current political climate:

- Show your enemies the genuine respect that every human being deserves. Learn to think of them with compassion.
- In cultivating compassion, it may help to visualize your enemies as the children they once were (and somehow remain).
- Do not dispense compassion from above, but meet your enemies in your imagination always at eye-level.
- Make every effort to come to know and understand them better – their hopes, their fears, concerns, and aspirations.
- Search for common goals, spell them out, and try to explore together ways of reaching these goals.
- Don't cling to your own convictions. Examine them in light of your enemies' convictions with all the sincerity you can muster.
- Invite your enemies to focus on issues. While focusing on the issues at hand, suspend your convictions.
- Do not judge persons, but look closely at the effect of their actions. Are they building up or endangering the common good?
- Take a sober look at your enemies' goals and evaluate them with fairness. If necessary, block them decisively.
- In order to counteract your enemies effectively on a given issue, join the greatest possible variety of likeminded people.
- Wherever possible, show your enemies kindness. Do them as much good you can. At least, sincerely wish them well.
- For the rest, entrust yourself and your enemies to the great Mystery of life that has assigned us such different – and often opposing – roles, and that will see us through if we play or part with love.

Misconceptions linger. Nobody wants to be a doormat for another. Nobody wants to be perceived as weak.

Just remember, however, how Martin Luther King, Jr. prepared people to face Bull Connor, to face police dogs, to face fire hoses. He made them strong. He wasn't playin'.

And as we soon will be entering Lent, remember Jesus suffering a painful and humiliating, public, political execution and praying, **“Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”** (Luke 23:34) Jesus wasn't weak. Jesus wasn't playin'.

Consider the face of fierce compassion.

Amen.

Luke 6:27-36

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give

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. ³⁶Your 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.