

February 20, 2022 – Seventh Sunday of Epiphany

[Jesus said:] 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. 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.”

“But ...” Jesus says.

Ah, yes, there’s always a “but,” isn’t there?

And this one is kind of a big “but.”

**Blessing and woe, you may remember from a week ago,
a great lifting up and humbling down, the Lord preached ...**

“but” ...

But I say to *you that listen*, he says.

It's good to know as a preacher that even Jesus was aware he had lost some portion of his audience less than two minutes into a sermon.

At this point, Luke hasn't gotten to the parable of the farmer scattering seed yet but Jesus is evidently aware some will fall on not-exactly-fertile ground. His message is too difficult to hear, too hard to receive for some. So be it. There may be another time when it may take hold. There may not. The Spirit does what it will. But for those able to accept it now, here goes ... there's more.

But love your enemies.

Yes, you have heard that all are to get what is coming to them, for better and for worse, but there's a very narrow, very specific way of going about that.

To understand this, we have to understand a bit about the currencies of honor and shame, and the zero-sum nature of this game in first-century Judea and the surrounding

territories. Honor is good for you and yours, shame is bad and to gain honor typically means another takes on shame. There's a whole lot riding on this in terms of social standing and acceptance in community and society.

In this framework, Jesus is saying radical stuff. No one expects honor among the poor, nor shame among the rich. Nobody recognizes honor in being insulted nor shame in being flattered. Jesus is speaking into existence a whole new paradigm for his realm of heaven and doing so with practical, but risky, examples of enacting it on this troubled earth.

Jesus' commands are too easily written off as a sucker's approach to life, a recipe for getting walked all over by the world but not so. To turn one's cheek when struck is not passive or submissive but subversive. A slave or servant, someone of lower class, or a child or woman, someone of lower standing, could be reprimanded by someone with greater power than they were with a backhand

to the right cheek. To hit back surely tempted but was essentially suicidal.

But ... to offer the other cheek made a clear and strong silent statement. One can't backhand with the left hand, used for personal hygiene and it was considered shameful to even gesture with that hand. What an awful place it must have been to live with a dominant left hand is beyond the point.

The abuser is left with the option to strike with an open hand or a fist and by doing so, makes a silent statement that the one they have struck is their equal, worthy of such treatment and consideration. Now, they could also order a flogging in their anger and outrage but even still, the point gets made: I am a human being and you cannot take away my dignity and humiliate me.

Jesus' next example is also often misunderstood without translating across cultures. It would seem offering your shirt to someone who has taken away your coat is

setting yourself up as an easy target for abuse. But rather it again puts the aggressor in a tough spot ... to be responsible for making someone go naked brings shame on oneself. If they accept the shirt, too, the honor-shame calculation tips the other way. The offer alone calls attention to the injustice and will be noticed.

Martin Luther King Jr. observed that “far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.”

King and many others worked to overturn Jim Crow with a nonviolent resistance based on the principles Jesus taught. Loving the enemy meant taking abhorrently inhuman violence, from dog attacks to fire hoses to the lynching tree for Black activists during the 1950s and 1960s. There were

too many martyred. But the tactics employed were seen. The point was made. Bystanders could no longer look past. A nation could no longer plead ignorance of the ugly reality lying beneath the platitude of “separate but equal.”

But discovering the meaning of this command, as King defined our Christian responsibility, is still a process.

Another example from history of the past century serves to illustrate Jesus’ next point. It’s no impressive feat to love those who love you back, to be kind to those kind to you, to give to those who pay back in full ... evil people do that stuff. It's not hard to comb through Holocaust-era documents and find photos of happy Nazi SS families and tender missives written by mass murderers toward people they genuinely loved and liked. The greatest sins and most terrifying evils were not uniformly committed by monsters, caricatures of human beings, but actual people who went home to meals with laughter around the dinner table. Perhaps a scarier

thought when looking hard at it. Harder to dismiss as unrepeatable history.

Long, hard looks are in order for followers of Christ at our lives and our world today. Our world is divided with the gaps between rich and poor, left and right, growing day after day and year after year. The way forward is not to pretend the world is any different than it is and to ignore its problems – our problems – in hopes they will go away on their own or to only consider and act on what little we can find full agreement on.

But ... there is no path forward, no honor, in becoming more like what we stand against. There is room for disagreement and there are also sharp rights and wrongs, fundamental human rights and human dignity that must be preserved. There is grace but there is also consequence for actions. The boundaries within which we love the people it ain't easy to love are not simple to discern. In Matthew,

Jesus likens such a thing to being as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. It also helps to recognize we aren't always the easiest people to love, ourselves.

It's like threading the tiniest needle to find that sweet spot of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. But it begins with recognizing those we identify as our enemies are people, according to them human dignity and not cartoon-like evil, I think that's safe to assume. And it continues with taking risk ... allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, relying on decency to prevail when asserting what is right and true and recouping to do it again when our efforts are met with disinterest and disdain.

It isn't easy. It isn't fun.

But it is Christ-like.

Amen.