

The Way of Love
Psalm 37:1-11 Romans 12:9-17, 21 Luke 6:27-38

This follows on the heels of last week's teaching on blessings and woes.

Remember, Jesus is speaking to his disciples—people who have chosen to follow him. With a large crowd of others overhearing.

Luke 6:27-38

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. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do 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. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If 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. ³⁵ But 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. ³⁶ Be 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; ³⁸ give, 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."

This is the word of the Lord!

Happy Valentine's Day! Jesus talks about love this morning. Awwwww. This isn't exactly the kind of love with think of on Valentine's Day, though: loving our enemies. "Here's a box of chocolates." Although, giving an enemy a box of chocolates might fit well within the scope of this teaching!

I'd like to remind us, right from the start, that this audacious teaching is for *the disciples*. Jesus didn't speak this to the Roman parliament, to the civil authorities or even to the religious authorities of the day. He isn't at the United Nations giving a speech on loving enemies and let's all stop judging each other.

This teaching is for his followers, those who are going to be part of his movement; those who, as he said in another place, are salt and light to the world, whose light will shine through their good works. And these are the good works he is talking about—not doing good to good people, but doing good to people who are difficult for us to love.

And because this teaching is for his followers, therefore this teaching is for those who have heard the affirmation of their belovedness, who are trying to live into their belovedness. That's a very important piece to this. Those who hear Jesus' words are part of the band of people who have heard the pronouncement,

“You are my beloved; with you I am well-pleased.” Because it’s that inner strengthening that enables a person to do what Jesus asks.

One commentator called this teaching, “The impossible possibility.” It’s impossible at first take, or even after a second take. We hear it and say to ourselves or to Jesus: I can’t do this; it just isn’t possible for me. But then we hear the affirmation ring out, that *with God all things are possible*, as God’s love and God’s Spirit strengthen us inwardly, over time. And as we grow in love we try, we fail, and we learn, and we engage a *process* of loving others, step by step, over time.

This teaching presents an alternative to resolving conflicts and injury, given particularly to God’s people, people of The Way, Christians. At that time, there were laws in place that not only allowed, but practically mandated retribution as a way of resolving personal injury situations. It was their way of *preventing* runaway revenge and, in their thinking, it deescalated violence because it provided a legal way for an injured person to see the perpetrator injured in-kind (or some equivalent way). Those laws were put in place to prevent people from taking the law into their own hands, which would lead to escalating violence.

The only problem was, those laws didn’t resolve the deeper issues inside the human heart, actually caused *more* injury, and they didn’t fully and truly

reflect God's heart of love. They just ensured that people didn't kill each other willy-nilly in fits of revenge. Like Sean Connery's character in gangster movie *The Untouchables* (when he says to Elliot Ness about a rival gangster boss): "He pulls a knife, you pull a gun; he sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue."

Jesus' Way goes much deeper than the law (and certainly deeper than vigilante justice), and offers a way to potentially stop a cycle of violence altogether. Through love. Love in the form of generosity and kindness, and *assertive* non-resistance; through mercy and forgiveness, and of dropping judgments against others.

Let's be honest—this sounds hard to do, and we probably don't want to do this! It goes against what we normally and reflexively want to do.

But Jesus is giving us a lesson here, not simply in what to *do*, as an alternative, but primarily it's a lesson in *who God is*: God is merciful; God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Wait, what?!? God is kind to the wicked? I can think of some pretty wicked people. And I'm sure you can too. God is kind to *them*? In Matthew's version Jesus says God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good; he sends rain on the good and the wicked. That's not fair! And Jesus replies: that's right, it isn't fair. But God is a God of grace and mercy, and grace

and mercy are by nature unfair. Grace has been defined as giving people what they don't deserve. That's unfair. But that's why grace is amazing, right? Because at some point we realize that we are undeserving recipients of this amazing grace as well.

So the audacity of this teaching isn't that he asks us to love enemies, turn the other cheek, stop judging people and all that. It's what he says about who God is: that God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Who does God think God is?!?!

What Jesus instructs us to do, therefore, requires a surrender of the will—not to an *offender*, but to *God*. A consent of our will to God's will—in order to do what's loving and best and God-like, and not just what relieves our frustration or our sense of injustice in the moment.

Again, learning to do this is a process, step by step, bit by bit. This reading feels like being offered a drink of water from a fire hose. But the grace of it is, we take steps toward learning to do this, in a process of discipleship with Jesus. Jesus doesn't just lay this teaching down and expect us to get it right, right away. He's initiating a process of growth and learning, which is also a process of healing, as

we'll see. Healing for us, healing for others. So we need to give ourselves grace, and each other grace, as we journey together on this road of learning to love.

And let us not forget that Jesus says we can pray for someone who is difficult for us to love, as a small step. When all else fails, if we can't muster the strength to proactively do something good to someone, perhaps we can pray for them. Even if it's just a short sentence prayer, asking God to bless them in Jesus' name. Perhaps this is where the healing can begin.

A governing principle and lesson here, and from Paul's words in Romans, is this: don't take matters into your own hands; don't seek revenge or retaliation. *God* is the judge and, in the end, God will sort things out. That's God's business and not ours. Our responsibility is to love and to do good to *everyone*. In the apostle Paul's words: as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with *everyone*.

I think of it this way: Whew! What a relief! I don't *have to* judge anyone! I can let go of that burden. I don't have to criticize or condemn anyone. Yay! That's God's job. There is great freedom and relief in this. Of learning to let go.

That's a big relief to me because when I get judgmental toward others I'm the worst; I become somebody I'm not—somebody I was not created to be. Judgmental religious people are some of the nastiest people. In large part

because they tend to make God in their image, and then—lo and behold—that God ends up hating the same people they do. And then they feel justified in doing terrible things to others whom they believe are outside of God’s favor. That’s why I say this teaching is as much of a lesson about who God is as it is about what Jesus calls us to do. Because our understanding of who God is influences how we see and treat others. So, the term “judgmental Christian” is an oxymoron!

It reminds me of the story of a little girl saying her prayers at night, and she prays: Dear God, please make the bad people good, and the good people nice.

So I’m glad to be relieved of the burden of judging someone (most of the time 😊). And turn everything and everyone over to God, who knows how to handle everything and everyone way better than I do.

And then, with that sense of relief, and out of the belovedness in which we stand, God wants to blow the minds of people who do unjust or obnoxious things, by having his people do *weird and unexpected* things in response. Like being kind, generous and prayerful. Again, it potentially stops the cycle of conflict and violence.

MLK (who knew something about loving his enemies): *“Returning violence for violence only multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already*

devoid of stars. And darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. We are to act justly in the face of injustice.” We can act justly as individuals while we work for justice for everyone.

I love the phrase: the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

Paul’s way of saying it: overcome evil with good.

It is important to note that what Jesus teaches here is not a strategy of weakness, but actually a strategy of great strength and wisdom. We’re not asked to be doormats. Jesus doesn’t tell us to do nothing, or run away and avoid confrontation altogether, or lay down and take abuse. He says, rather, be *assertive*, and stay present to those who are bad to you. Stay present, stand your ground, do good, *but don’t get even*. Do good, but don’t get even. Resolve not to hurt back, but to love. Do you see how this is a strategy of strength, and not weakness?

This strength is affirmed in the apostle Paul’s prayer for the church (which I use from time to time as I pray for people): Ephesians 3:16-17: *“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit,¹⁷ and that*

Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” This is where the strength comes from to do what Jesus teaches us to do.

This teaching is a kindness from our Lord, as is Paul’s teaching from Romans. They’re both saying, “Look, if you let others get the best of you and you respond in unhelpful ways, if you hang on to judgments against others, the consequences can be harmful *to you*. But if you do good, good will be returned to you. If you choose mercy, you’ll experience mercy.”

Because... mercy is the ability to see the hurt in someone which has caused them to hurt others. Perhaps you’ve heard the phrase, “Hurt people hurt people.” It’s become kind of a cliché, but it’s become a cliché because it rings true. Every study that is done about violent crime reveals that the perpetrator of violence, 95% of the time, was a *victim* of violence at some point in their life. Mercy is the ability to begin to see the hurt that caused a person to speak or act the way they did.

So, when hurt by someone else, mercy is the ability to pause and be curious about what is going on in the other person’s life. One of our favorite phrases is: it’s better to be curious than furious. Sometimes furious feels good, and there is a place for anger. But when we can slow ourselves down and ask for God’s help to

be merciful, we can learn to be curious instead of just furious. And ask for help to see another's hurt, and not just their actions.

Then, mercy goes further to see not only *another's* hurt and pain, but to see myself in another person. To see our common humanity, and realize that sometimes I'm just one bad decision away from being that person who behaves like an enemy to someone else. Therefore, the kindness we offer to another ends up being a kindness we extend to ourselves.

This is what Jesus means here, when he says that whatever we give will be returned to us. We have the opportunity to heal ourselves, as we love others.

The idea here is that if I can love someone who has the same shadows in their life that I do in mine, I can learn to love myself—by loving them. That's a mind-bender, but it's true. And the result is that I become more patient, and more accepting over time. Because I learn to be loved by God, and experience God's mercy for myself. Because God loves all of us *equally*. And whatever hurt I've experienced begins to heal. Because I'm learning to let go.

Jesus mentions forgiveness in this teaching, and it's interesting that the word "forgive" in Greek comes from the same root as the word "let."

Forgiveness, as an act of love, is an act of letting go. Of releasing burdens.

Setting them in the river of God's grace and letting them flow downstream to God's ocean of love.

This has been a tough two years. Pandemic, politics. And things are going to continue to be challenging, politically. And perhaps relationally, because of it all. We need to breathe, give ourselves and each other grace. We need to learn to love—to learn to abide in love and receive it, to learn to give love where it's really needed.