

The Way of Love

Romans 12:9-18, 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, no doubt overhearing. So, let's imagine being there and hearing these words, perhaps as if for the first time...

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷ "But I say to you that listen (who have ears to hear and want to be part of the Kingdom Way), 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!
Jesus talks about love this morning. Awwwww. Love is a many splendored thing, as the old song says, and we can groove on the idea of loving our neighbor, loving our circle of family and friends, and even loving the stranger and all that. But here, Jesus is telling his followers that God's love is much wider and deeper and it includes learning to love those who we would not normally include among those we think we ought to love, or who we want to love or feel like loving.

I'd like to remind us, as we dive into this, that this audacious teaching is for *the disciples*. Jesus didn't speak this 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 only, or doing good deeds to help those in need, but also doing good to people who are difficult for us to love, who can make our life difficult.

I'm sure this teaching was a shock to their ears, when they first heard it. Because the conventional wisdom of the day was: love your neighbor but hate your enemy. Maybe it's still a shock to *our* ears when we hear it!

Jesus is teaching about, and is himself living, an alternative Kingdom, which is big and expansive and absurdly generous. So, he says, think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it. Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead, expecting nothing in return. And in doing these things, there will be blessing.

As I'm re-reading Luke, and keeping an eye on the other gospels too, as a reference, it strikes me that Jesus doesn't do what many teachers do—like our school teachers did, and some college professors: which is, start with light and easy lessons and gradually work their way up to the more difficult ones. Rather, Jesus does what one of my college history professors did at the beginning of the year, when he handed out the syllabus for the semester, with all of the required papers and exams, which felt overwhelming, and said, "This is going to be a hard class. It's going to be a challenging class, but a **good** class because by the end of the semester you will have done a deep dive into American history and you will have learned things you never knew. So, buckle up."

Jesus doesn't start light and easy. In Matthew's gospel he jumps right in with what's called the Sermon on the Mount (ch's 5-7) which has similar teachings to what we hear in Luke. Jesus doesn't want to give any false notions about what following him means, and what his disciples are asked to learn to do. Again, this is a *learning* journey; the word "disciple" means "learner," or "student," so there is a lot of grace along the way because it's a learning process. And, there are promises of good things returned to us when we practice these principles. It isn't drudgery, but a rewarding journey—not just because of the Christian version of karma that Jesus talks about (what you give is what you get and all that) but because we will know that we are walking in rhythm with God, in harmony with God, in love—being like God, doing as God does.

With regard to this morning's teaching, one commentator called it, "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. 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.

Of course this applies to those whom Jesus calls enemies, but honestly, it's hard sometimes to love those *who we genuinely like*. Because sometimes we have a bad day, or we're tired or irritable, or people bug us and our reflexive response isn't always our best. Yet, we try, we learn, and we stay on the path of love, with God's help.

Here is what's great about this teaching from Jesus: it's a practice that presents the best alternative to resolving conflicts and injury. 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, they believed it deescalated violence because it provided a legal way for an injured person to see the perpetrator injured *in some equivalent way*. For example, if someone killed two of your goats—whether on purpose or by accident—you were allowed to kill two of their goats. That seems wasteful and kind of cruel, but those laws were put in place to prevent people from taking the law into their own hands, which would lead to escalating violence.

The problem with those laws, however, is: they didn't resolve the deeper issues inside the human heart, they actually caused *deeper* 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." That mentality has been around for a long time, and the laws of old tried to mitigate it.

Jesus' Way, the Kingdom Way, goes much deeper than the law, and offers a way to potentially stop a cycle of violence altogether. Through... love. Love in the form of kindness and mercy, and assertive non-resistance; and of dropping judgments against others.

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

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 right now. And I'm sure you can too. God is kind to *them*? In Matthew's version of this Jesus says "God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good; he sends rain on the just and the unjust." That's not fair! And Jesus replies: that's right, it isn't fair. Because, 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*. It requires 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. There are ways to work for justice that are peaceful and loving, that don't involve revenge or hatred. In fact, *we are called* to do justice—but it's justice done with mercy, and walking humbly with God. Even if God does have a thing for ungrateful and wicked people...

Again, learning to do this is a process, step by step, bit by bit. To me 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, and in community with others who are also trying and failing and learning. 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 from Jesus, 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. *God* will sort things out. And we are assured that there *will be* some kind of accountability and reckoning. God *will* make things right. Even so, we are told 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 (and me), live peaceably with *everyone*. Because even God's accountability measures and judgment are somehow wrapped up in God's love and mercy. I guess this is a way of saying that God is better at this than we are, so we best leave it to God.

Here is how I like to think of this teaching; here is my reaction to it (once I get past how hard it sounds): 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! There is great freedom and relief in this. Of learning to let go, and let God do what only God is really qualified to do.

That's a relief to me because when I get judgy toward others I'm the worst; I become somebody I'm not—somebody I was not created to be. Judgmental religious people—clergy included—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 his followers to do. Because our understanding of who God is influences how we see and treat others.

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

Anyway, I'm glad to be relieved of the burden of judging someone (most of the time 😊). It's a blessing and relief to 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 and the strength 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's the best alternative to ending the cycle of conflict and violence. And, it blows their mind. That's what the "heap burning coals upon their head" means from the Romans reading. Be kind to your enemies and it will blow their minds.

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, and I want to emphasize, that what Jesus teaches here is not a strategy of weakness, but actually a strategy of great strength and wisdom and assertiveness. 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 difficult. 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 God's glory, God grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and 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.

Strengthened in our inner being from the Spirit, as we are being rooted and grounded in love, in Christ.

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 this phrase: "Hurt people hurt

people.” 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. Here is another favorite phrase: it’s better to be curious than furious. Sometimes furious feels good, though, right?, and there *is* a place for anger, when it can be observed, transformed, and channeled properly into helpful action. 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 and faults 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 the original 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. You can almost feel the deep breath of letting go of burdens, setting them in the river of God's grace, and letting them flow downstream to God's ocean of love. This will come up again in Luke, so I'll "let" this be for now...

This has been a rough few years, hasn't it? Going all the way back to the Covid pandemic. Remember that? There are indeed many good things to celebrate and enjoy every day, and we need to find the good and practice joy every day. At the same time it's been a bumpy ride to say the least. And things are going to continue to be challenging, politically and societally—and perhaps relationally, because of it all. Therefore we need to take time to breathe, be more

intentionally mindful, and care-full, and give ourselves and each other grace.

Especially as we learn to love—as we learn to abide in love and receive it, and

learn to give love where it's really needed.

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