

Epiphany 7C 2019 Sermon

Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said, "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. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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."

Jesus teaches his followers, saying, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you..." Turn the other cheek; give to everyone who begs; if someone steals your goods, don't try to get them back. Do not judge...

My friends, this is hard. The truth of the matter is that Jesus' teachings in today's Gospel are so *opposite* to the way the overwhelming majority of people think and act in this world that many people, even faithful Christians, either don't take these teachings seriously, or simply ignore them, or find some justification as to why they don't apply in their own situation. Fr. John Shea writes, "This teaching will certainly thin the crowd of Jesus' followers. It is a suggestion that goes directly against common sense... Doing good to those who hate you is codependency at best and masochism at worst. Giving to everyone who begs means that you will soon become a beggar and find out most people *don't* give to those who beg... Has Jesus been out in the sun too long without a hat? The parody of this teaching has real appeal: 'Do unto others before they do it unto you.'"¹

But seriously: How does Jesus expect us to follow these teachings – especially today, when women have been abused by priests and powerful businessmen and Hollywood stars and media moguls? Are we to tell them, "Jesus says to turn the other cheek"?

Perhaps the most troubling (but not uncommon) response to these teachings of Jesus is to think that Jesus is too idealistic, naïve and out of touch with the *real* world. This way of thinking allows us Christians to live our lives on our own terms, *ignoring* the teachings of Jesus altogether.

And yet, my friends, I firmly believe that today's Gospel passage is, in many respects, **the** most important passage in the Bible. For it challenges some of our most deeply-held assumptions about how we see and deal with other people – how we get along with others in this world. I think it fair to say that most of us treat others kindly as long as they treat us kindly; but if others act badly, it is only “human nature” to want to respond in kind, is it not? Yet Jesus counters this “eye for an eye” attitude by saying that we should not treat others the way they treat us, but rather we should treat others the way **we** would like to be treated, *regardless* of how they treat us. “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” Jesus says. We call it “the golden rule,” and it is found not just in our Christian Bible, but in every major religion in the world.² We teach it to our children; and yet, if we are honest, we find it hard to follow ourselves.

Let me say it again: this is hard! In fact, I would argue that if we see Jesus' teachings in today's Gospel as commandments that we are to follow, it will be humanly *impossible* to do so – as long as we are operating from our ego selves and nothing deeper. But these are **not** commandments for our ego selves to follow; for they contradict the very mindset of the ego, which is hardwired for competing, comparing, judging, tit for tat, and seeking its own advantage. Rather, these teachings of Jesus are invitations to live within the kingdom of God, wherein a very different mindset operates. These teachings speak directly to the indwelling spirit of Christ within each of us. And within the mind of Christ, the heart of Christ, the love of the indwelling Christ, our actions do not depend on the actions of others; they are not knee-jerk responses to what others say or do. Circumstances do not control us; who we are in Christ controls us. We live *in* God's love, and respond *from* God's love; and we will act from that place of love no matter *how* **other** people are acting. Fr. Shea writes, “Enemies, persecutors, and haters cannot make us into themselves, infecting us with their toxicity. This has always been their power. They make returning evil in kind *appear* necessary...”

“However, in Jesus' teaching this seduction to imitate violent power has met a firmer resolve... What Jesus is saying is: ‘Stop the crazy, endless slaughter by stopping it in yourself. Do not participate in evil on evil's terms.’”³

Rather, Jesus says, “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 [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

You and I are created in the image and likeness of a loving God, and if **God** is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,” then we – if we are truly living out of our identity as “children of the Most High” – we will likewise be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. “[God] is a Father of unwavering love, an infinitely merciful reality,” writes Fr. Shea. “If we are in touch with this loving God who cannot be anything *but* love, then neither can *we* be anything **but** love. It is our inner relationship to the loving God that determines our response to whatever is happening.”⁴ Not our circumstances. No matter what people do or say to us, we love in return, since we live in God, and God is love.

This does not mean that we allow others to mistreat or abuse us; that would not be loving to them or to us. Rather, what it means is that we do not respond to mistreatment with hatred and revenge, which have no place in the heart of the indwelling God or the mind of Christ – that mind which Paul tells us we must have in ourselves.

There is a story about two monks who go to wash their bowls in a stream. One of them sees a scorpion which has fallen into the stream and will surely drown. The monk reaches out to save the scorpion from drowning, but the scorpion stings the monk’s hand and he reflexively draws it back. Again the monk reaches out to save the scorpion, and again the scorpion stings the monk. When the monk reaches out a third time to try to save the scorpion, his fellow monk says, “Brother, why do you continually subject yourself to the scorpion’s stings?” And the first monk responds, “It is the scorpion’s nature to sting; it is my nature to save, and I cannot act against my nature.” The monk does not let outward circumstances control his loving actions which proceed from who he is in Christ.

The final paragraph in today’s Gospel reading deserves a sermon of its own, but I will comment on it briefly before closing. Jesus tells us, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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.”

Once again, Jesus’ teachings could not be more contemporary and relevant, for as I said in my sermon on the Beatitudes last week, we seem to be masters at judging and condemning others and seeing everything dualistically; and in the political climate of today’s world, forgiveness looks like giving in – something no politician ever wants to do. It is a testimony to our confounding human capacity to proclaim belief in something and act in an entirely opposite way when prominent Christian figures and political leaders advocate judging and condemning others while at the same time trumpeting their credentials as Christians.

Those of you who have heard me preach and teach over the past 21 years have heard me talk about flow. You have heard me say that each of us has a

metaphorical pipeline entering into our head and exiting from our hearts, with a stopcock that we can open or close. To pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” means that God pours forgiveness into us *as* we allow that forgiveness to flow out from us to others. But the minute we close the stopcock and stop the flow of forgiveness out from us to others, God *cannot* pour his forgiveness into us, for we have stopped the flow.

I believe this is what Jesus is talking about in this last paragraph: As long as we refuse to judge and condemn and hold onto other people’s sins, God’s mercy and forgiveness and kindness flow into us and through us. But the minute we judge, condemn, and refuse to let go of other people’s sins, we have closed the stopcock, and judgment, condemnation, and unforgiveness collect inside us and eat away at our soul. The measure we give will be the measure we get back.

Let me end with an excerpt from a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, as translated in the final hymn which we will sing today:

Lord, make me a channel of your peace
Where there is hatred let me bring your love
Where there is injury, your pardon Lord
And where there’s doubt, true faith in you

Oh, master grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul

Make me a channel of your peace
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving of ourselves that we receive
And in dying that we’re born to eternal life.⁵

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 47-48

² (<https://charterforcompassion.org/an-interview-with-dr-karen-armstrong-the-golden-rule-and-religion>)

³ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 48

⁴ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 48

⁵ Prayer of St. Francis; adapt. by Sebastian Temple, 1928–1997 ©1967, OCP, OneLicense.net # A-720388