

## Epiphany 7C 2022 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."*

Continuing his Sermon on the Plain, which he began in last week's Gospel, 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, simply ignore these teachings, or find some justification as to why they don't apply in their own situation. 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 [yourself] and find out most people *don't* give to those who beg... Has Jesus been out in the sun too long without a hat?"<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to come to the conclusion that Jesus is too idealistic, naïve, and out of touch with the *real* world. And therefore, we feel **justified** in *ignoring* these teachings of Jesus. Many politicians who publicly proclaim their Christian faith nonetheless think they are justified in being vindictive against anyone who disagrees with them, seeing them as enemies to be punished or censored, or calling them "losers" or "weak" or some other deprecatory epithet. They seem to

have never heard today's teachings of Jesus – or, they have chosen to ignore them.

Now, 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? In fact, it's only *fair* that we respond in kind! Quid pro quo, tit for tat, eye for an eye. And yet, what Gandhi purportedly said is undeniably true: “An eye for an eye will soon make the whole world blind.”

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 – independent of – how they treat us. “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” Jesus says in today's Gospel. We call it “the golden rule,” and it is found not just in our Christian Bible, but in every major religion in the world.<sup>2</sup> We teach it to our children; and yet, we find it hard to follow, ourselves – at least when we are living from our ego selves, our small selves, our surface selves, our worldly selves.

But Jesus' teachings in today's Gospel are **not** commandments for our **ego** selves to follow. They contradict the very mindset of the ego, the mindset of this world, which is hardwired for competing, comparing, judging, and seeking its own advantage. No. Jesus' teachings make no sense when viewed from the mindset of our ego, or the mindset of **this** world's values and perspectives. Rather, these teachings of Jesus are invitations to live within the kingdom of God, wherein a very *different* mindset operates. Within the kingdom of God, our actions do not depend on the actions of others; they are not knee-jerk reactions to what others say or do. Circumstances do not control us within the kingdom of God; who we are in God is in control. 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.’”<sup>3</sup> 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, my friends, are created in the image and likeness of an infinitely loving God. And if **God** is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,” then we – if we are living out of our identity as “children of the Most High” – we will *likewise* be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. John Shea notes, “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.”<sup>3</sup> It is our inner relationship to the loving God that determines our response to whatever is happening. Our response to someone’s hateful, or hurtful, or malicious words or actions is not determined by the energies of hate or hurt or malevolence which are behind those words or actions. We don’t soak in those negative energies and use them to react in kind – anger to anger, hurt to hurt. Rather, our response *always* emanates from that place of true freedom within us, our inner relationship to the loving God in whose image and likeness we were all created.

The Sufis (Islamic mystics) tell this story:

“Jesus was walking down the road with his disciples. Some people threw stones at him and cursed him. Jesus blessed them.

“The disciples asked him, ‘Master, why do you bless those who curse you?’

“Jesus replied, ‘I can only give what I have in my purse.’”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus does not have curses in his purse; only blessings. He responds from who he is and what he has.

There is an important distinction between “reaction” and “response.” John Shea explains, “Reaction is knee-jerk, a mindless, mechanistic imitation of what is presented to us... Response, however, is mindful, a bringing forth of who we really are to engage what has approached us.”<sup>5</sup>

And therein lies freedom, my friends! The mindset of this world tends to think that we are courageous and strong and free when we react to curses with *more* curses; attacks with *more* attacks; violence with *more* violence. If we do *not* react in this reflexive manner, it is seen as weakness or cowardice or submission to the will of our attacker. Jesus was seen as weak and helpless when he allowed the Romans to arrest, flog, and crucify him without putting up any resistance. Yet nothing could have been further from the truth! His refusal to react in kind to those who betrayed him, denied him, flogged and crucified him was not passive acquiescence but a free and powerful decision to allow his Father’s saving and redemptive will to be done through him, whatever sufferings it would take. *This* is strength! *This* is courage!

Which brings up one final point. Yes, when we respond to negative outward circumstances from our inner self, who we are in God, we are freed *from* knee-jerk negative reactions to those outward circumstances. But when we respond to outward circumstances from our *inner Self* we are not only freed *from* knee-jerk negative reactions; we are also freed *for* God’s will to be done in our lives. John Shea puts it this way: “It is not just that we are free *from* compulsive reaction, we are free *to* embody the loved and loving identity that is our core.”<sup>6</sup> Free to incarnate the loved and loving identity that is our core. Free to allow the Spirit of God to flow strongly through our life into the lives of others and out into the world to do God’s saving, healing, life-fulfilling will. It is our life’s calling.

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 47-48

2 “The Golden Rule and Religion” <https://charterforcompassion.org/an-interview-with-dr-karen-armstrong-the-golden-rule-and-religion>

3 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 48

4 Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 49-50

5 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 50

6 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 50