

Epiphany 7C - February 24, 2019 - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Luke 6:27-38 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

### ***I'm Beginning To See The Light***

Last week, the beginning of the Sermon on the Plain showed us paradox is meant to crack us open so the light of God can get in. This week, there's a rigorous self awareness that is meant to break open the soul so that we can become vehicles of God's light. Learning to love the way God loves means we apply a rigorous, continual application of Jesus' teaching and presence to our lives.

Jesus here, and in our verses from 1 Corinthians, calls us to enter into a radical alternative reality. In my personal experience, the mere appearance of this alternative reality makes me very, very aware of how entrenched and committed to this reality I actually am. None of this work that Jesus calls us to is easy, and I know I say that often, but it is so important for us to remember, especially those of us who are not the poor or victimized or downtrodden. We must continually reverse our privileged mindset and see the world from a different perspective, a Jesus perspective, and this is often a perspective that is a direct threat to everything we have achieved and gained in this reality.

Paul says in 1st Corinthians today: "*And just as we have borne the image of the earthly person, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly person.*" To remember this is an act of will that is meant to empower not only you, but everyone we encounter, to remember that we are citizens of Heaven first and foremost, and because of that primary citizenship, everything has changed.

This heavenly citizenship is the point of view Jesus is speaking from in the Sermon on the Plain. *Love enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Turn the other cheek.* The appropriate, and very difficult, way to think about these words from Jesus is to hear them as training to become a warrior in the arts of love and kindness, which is as defiant and as effective as knowing how to use an actual weapon.

GK Chesterton said once, "*The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.*" This is what makes this so difficult. Most of our neighbors and our enemies and even you and I do the same thing they did in Jesus' day. We live in a society of contracts and obligations. You give me something; I am obligated to give you something in return. If you take something from me, I expect something of equal value to be credited to me from you. On and on. In the ancient world, this was called the *Lex Talionis*, the law of the claw, or *an eye for an eye*, to quote Deuteronomy. Today, I would say it is the community standard of reciprocity.

But Jesus flips all this around. Loving our enemies is significant because it means we approach hate, wrongdoing, and evil the same way God did with us - by seeking what is best and by

presuming the best for the other person, and then finding ways to provide that care to the other person. Jesus doesn't present this so we can have a debate about "what ifs", like, "Well, what if someone kills my family", or "Say, tonight, Jesus, my neighbor steals my best sheep from my field, and then I go to him the next day and accuse him, because I am looking right at the sheep, and he claims the sheep as his own? What then, Jesus? What would I do then?" This is not about hypotheticals. This is about the conflicts you and I are actually in now. It is about the things you and I have already done. It is about living like Christ in community with others here and now. How will we provide the same love and care that God has shown us to those who have wronged us that God?

Even so, Jesus does use some hypotheticals in his sermon. One Jesus uses is "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer the other also." Contrary to popular belief, this is not a suggestion that you get hit again. Instead, this is an act of defiance. If the person who hit you once, hits you again, everyone present sees the person who hit you for the person they actually are. The person who hits has to make a conscious choice to do it again. The offering of the other cheek becomes a symbolic act of dignity and of equality with the person who has struck you. By offering the other cheek, you raise the expectations of the encounter, rather than lowering the expectations to what we pass off as 'normal'. If someone hits me and, instead of hitting back, I present myself as an equal deserving of something more than violence, the whole dynamic can shift. If someone curses me and I bless them, I create an atmosphere that disrupts a descent into mutual hatred. If someone steals my coat from me, and I give them my shirt also, what does that say about stealing, giving, and taking? It makes for an interesting discussion, doesn't it? None of these actions Jesus speaks of are passive allowances for continued violence, hatred and misuse.

Tannehill (*Luke*) makes the point that this Jesus perspective is not being passive.

*Passivity would mean doing nothing. Offering the other cheek is doing something provocative. It risks greater harm in order to make a (nonverbal) statement, which requires the aggressor to take a second and more careful look at the one who is being victimized, with the possibility of a change in relationship (for better or worse). [p. 118]*

*We are not to do to others as they do to us but as we would **want** them to do to us. (from Brian Stoffgren's commentary: <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke6x27.htm>)*

It is interesting that Jesus considers all who are gathered on the plain to be victims, rather than victimizers. This can't be true. Every gathering of many people has both victims and victimizers. But imagine sitting there as the one who has struck their servant, or wife, or child that very morning, the one who is the victimizer. Who are you now? Who do you want to be in the eyes of God? Justified in your actions of hate and violence, or allied with those who suffer and are in need of justice? How do you do unto others what you would wish done to you if you are the one who victimizes others?

You can see why Jesus' words are meant to continually break us open. This is why this is rigorous work requiring continual self awareness and attention. The easy thing to do, as Jesus says, is to love people who love you. It's easy to be good to people who are good to you. That's what everyone does. Jesus asks, in the more appropriate translation, "*What special grace is that to you?*" What, indeed, have you shown of God in difficult situations? What makes us different from the culture around us? Do we want to be different from the culture which surrounds us? It is a powerful and terrifying challenge, isn't it? To make it even more challenging, Jesus says, *God is kind to the unthankful and to the evil, therefore, be merciful even as your Father is merciful.* God's grace is an overflowing, rushing river through the lives and souls of each and every person. God's kindness doesn't care what we think about who did what to whom.

The easy thing to do would be to hold ourselves apart from everyone else, like the rich man in the Temple with the tax collector. *Thank you, God, that I am not like those people over there who don't act out of the special grace God has shown me.* The easy thing to do would be to use our deeper awareness of Christ's greater reality as a way to judge other people. We see this all the time, don't we? Professed Christians getting massive airtime on our television and social media proclaiming what is best for everyone around them. Conform. Obey. Be like me. This should terrify us, just on a human level. But it should create an existential crisis of cosmic magnitudes for us on a spiritual level.

Why the existential crisis? Because all of us judge others. All of us hold people accountable and responsible for the evil things they've done. All of us are likely to react to increase the conflict when confronted with what offends and threatens us rather than decrease the conflict through Godly love and grace. The really hard work is loving the unlovable, showing kindness to the ungrateful, doing what we can to seek the best for our enemies, doing good to those who have done evil.

So when Jesus says, *judge not and you shall not be judged and condemn not and you will not be condemned*, the stakes get even higher. This command is not even an attitude that we can approach the world with. Non-judgment is not a cliché, nor is it a bumper sticker, nor is it a category of feeling or even thought. Instead, Jesus' difficult call is for the continual rigorous engagement with the judgments we *already have* and the judgments we *have already received* from other people.

When Kate and I were in the commune, an attitude and philosophy of complete non-judgment was promoted. Since everyone judges, things twisted bizarrely in the house. The incredibly deep judgment against people who judged because they were not being non-judgmental was powerful. People were forced out of the school for not being non-judgmental. Isn't that weird? And judgmental? But that is the thing about non-judgment as a philosophical position. It is a denial of reality.

The easy thing to do is to pretend that we're not people who judge, that we are people who presume that with some sort of magic incantation we can absolve ourselves from what Jesus requires of us - to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us and bless those who hurt us and pray for those who spitefully use us. Rather than addressing the judgement directly, we prefer to spiritually bypass the whole thing and therefore miss the opportunity to recognize another person as having dignity and equality, as being worthy of having a disagreement with. No, there is no moment this side of Heaven where we have somehow freed ourselves from judgement of others. People will judge you and you will judge other people. This is where the love of God and Christ all begins.

The issue is not whether or not we judge. We therefore must work backwards from the fact that we already judge and condemn.

See, we begin to see the light of God shining through other people when we deal with other people directly, when we are willing to recognize what we already do. That, and then recognizing that we are allowing ourselves to be broken open by paradoxes, that we are being rigorous warriors of love and kindness for a singular purpose: so that we may become a vehicle for God's love and kindness in this world, now, here. For these commands of Jesus to work, we have to directly confront hate, misuse of others, unkindness, abuse in ourselves first and then with others. Only then will be broken open by something other than judgment, fear, hate, and the scourging of the soul that seems to be our operating level right now as a culture. Christ's love is really the only way we will begin to see the light.

The good measure here is the deep and profound recognition that we have accepted a new reality, a radical new reality, that is trying to break through into this world. That reality is what Revelation calls the New Jerusalem coming down to earth, where the things of earth begin to resemble the things of Heaven. This happens through us. We bear the image of the heavenly and we share in the resurrection of Christ when we open ourselves to that alternative reality. It really is a strange way to think about ourselves. We are citizens of a new world that is always breaking into this world. We are not souls that depart the body anymore. We are not ethereal spiritual creatures living out a physical test here on earth. No, we are heralds of a vast enmeshing, perfecting, fusing of the physical, material, imperfect world with the spiritual, ethereal, perfect world of God and Christ.

This is hard work and it is meant to be. Remember what Paul tells us today: that we bear the image of the heavenly being of Christ and we are citizens of Heaven who are beginning to see the light on this earth. We Get To Decide which reality - the reality of continuing conflict and disunity and inequality, or the reality of God's love through Christ for everyone we meet - we will allow to become more present, here and now. Today. Amen.