

## **Sermon Text – Sunday, February 23, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 45:3-11,15**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: I Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50**

**Scripture for Message: Luke 6:27-38 “Love First”**

Contained within these few verses are diamonds in the form of advice for a life that follows Christ. Here we have Jesus’ sayings re: “Turn the other cheek,” “do unto others,” “love your enemies,” “do not judge,” and “give and it will be given to you.” Do these things and your reward will be eternal. But these things are difficult for us – it’s not in human nature to love our enemies or to do good to those who hate you. It is human nature to want retribution and to seek revenge. We don’t seem to like it when called on to be merciful, and we usually take advantage of someone who would “turn the other cheek” in our society – mocked and perceived as weak. It seems in our society we only perceive those who exhibit strength as worthy; our society would consider Jesus would an outcast with his weak and undesirable behaviors.

I recall an instructor in one of my humanities classes talking about the “Golden Rule” and commenting that it was inherently flawed. “What if I don’t want to be treated the way you want to be treated – what if the way you want to be treated is detrimental to me?” I think that’s a legitimate concern. But I wonder, have we, after centuries of hearing these axioms, convoluted their meaning and purpose and therefore weakened their significance to our lives? Going deeper into this scripture, understanding the context, and knowing what we know about Jesus’ life can transform how we look at these sayings and inform us how they affect our lives.

Luke continues to record Jesus’ preaching on the plain, Jesus is still with the people, still ministering to their needs both physical and spiritual and still teaching his disciples. Jesus is speaking to those who will listen to him. He begins by telling his followers to love their enemies, do good to those who hate you. I wonder if this came about after some perceived conflict, maybe there was quarreling about some of the ways Jesus healed and performed miracles. In parts of Luke’s writing that precede the verses we read today, Luke records that the Pharisees were accusing Jesus of blasphemy and looking for other reasons to accuse Jesus. I wonder if his disciples were urging Jesus to fight back, either in word or deed but Jesus tells them “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.” You must admit that even then, as now, that is not how most people deal with conflict.

Nevertheless, we know that Jesus taught his disciples a different way to live, he taught them to be holy by setting themselves apart from non-believers. Jesus

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has already stated to them what he came to do – to proclaim good news to all who would listen – the poor, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. Jesus was not living as the world expected, Jesus taught his followers to believe in a God different from what “society’s gods” are. God through Jesus was doing something drastically new – Jesus’ miracles and teachings illustrated new life bursting out energetically. Jesus taught his followers to not live as the world expected but to live as God expected, reflecting an attitude of the heart that would be their guide.

So, Jesus tells them to not repay violence with violence, do not hate when hated, do not resent when oppressed, do not seek revenge when persecuted, and do not hold on to grudges. What Jesus asks them is not to benefit the oppressor or the abuser but to benefit the oppressed and persecuted – allowing them to be “free” from anger and hate and holding grudges. That is primarily what turning the other cheek means – he is not telling his followers to be doormats but to love first, to give grace, and to forgive as they are forgiven. Jesus words lay out for his followers what this would look like.

He tells them, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” He then gives some examples how to be different from “even sinners” so that their reward will be great, and “you will be children of the Most High.” And if they wondered how they could manage all that, he lets them know in two words – be merciful – just as your Father is merciful. With mercy you can love your enemies. In mercy, those considered enemies become not enemies at all, but fellow sinners forgiven by God. The sacrifice made is that of letting go of the need for revenge and retribution – be free.

Jesus leads his followers into closer relationships with God by encouraging them to live holy lives. If all of those who choose to follow Jesus followed these rules and believed in a God of love, we could have a society where there wouldn’t be any violence, there wouldn’t be any revenge, there wouldn’t be any divisions of class, ethnicity, or gender. We pray for God’s will on earth as it is in heaven, and I wonder if that isn’t how we get there. By loving, by forgiving, by showing mercy, by doing these things that Jesus calls us to do “we enter into the very life of God.”<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus tells us to “Do to others as you would have them do to you” I wonder if he is really saying “That which is despicable to you, do not do to another.” Certainly, if we think something or some action is unacceptable, we should not be taking those actions against our fellow creatures – whether human or beast, friend, or foe. Jesus is not asking us, his followers, to live as victims but to respond to others with love, forgiveness, and generosity. Our lifestyles should

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Darden. “Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany: Luke 6:27-38, Connecting the Reading with the World” *Connections, Year C, Vol 1*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. print. 267-269

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not be determined by those who are against us, but neither should they be determined by those who we perceive are “on our side.” The lifestyle of those who follow Christ should be determined by what Christ expects of us – be merciful, forgive, do not judge, and do not condemn.

Finally, Jesus calls his followers to give – and it will be given to you. I wonder if some people pause at this statement and wonder what Jesus calls them to give. Jesus doesn't say give money and you will become rich and sometimes I think that is the meaning given to these words by those who subscribe to a prosperity Gospel. The bottom line in all of what Jesus is telling his followers here does not come down to money, but it we can perceive it as love. Jesus starts here with “love your enemies” and he finishes with “for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” It's only my opinion but I think Jesus is telling his disciples give love and you will receive love back, give mercy and you will receive mercy back, give grace and you will receive grace back – “a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.”

So, just how do we follow this pattern Jesus lays out for our lives? I believe that it requires patience, it requires virtue, it requires prudence to forgive and love one's enemy. It requires generosity in how we treat others. And here's one important statement, “one small – but altogether crucial – way that one forgives and loves one's enemies . . . is by not retaliating against them.”<sup>2</sup> When we look back to Genesis and the story of Joseph, part of which our Elder read this morning, we see a clear indication of forgiveness and restraint from retaliation and revenge. If this story were playing out in our culture – Joseph would have had his brothers thrown in prison. That's what we do today, we look for ways to get even and retaliate against whomever might have harmed us whether physically or emotionally. Joseph certainly had reason to seek retribution, his brothers had sold him into slavery.

But Joseph was not perfect either – he knew his father favored him and he strutted around in his “coat of many colors” holding that over his brother's heads. Joseph was arrogant and proud – if I had a sibling who acted that way I'd want to punch them. Maybe what the brothers did was exactly what they thought their arrogant younger brother deserved. Then came a time of regret when they realized how the loss of Joseph hurt their father. The story goes on with events happening to remove Joseph's pride and arrogance. Events that made Joseph realize God's guidance and presence with him. Yet these events also built Joseph up in stature, paving the way to truly test Joseph when the famine struck, when his brothers came to Egypt for help to survive.

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<sup>2</sup> Brent A. Strawn. “Seventy Sunday after Epiphany: Genesis 45:3-11, 15: Connecting the Reading with Scripture” *Connections, Year C, Vol. 1*. eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. print. 255-257

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Joseph recognized his brothers although they could not recognize him, Joseph had spent a lot of time hiding in the guise of an Egyptian. What we read this morning brings the story to a conclusion – Joseph could exact revenge and retaliate for the wrongs his brothers committed. He however chose compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Do you think that was hard for him to do? Forgiveness required Joseph to set aside his Egyptian mask and become who God created him to be, that took strength and restraint. I wonder if it would have been impossible had Joseph not come to learn that God was with him and that he had received the ultimate grace and forgiveness from God.

In our scripture readings we hear Jesus call us to love first, to turn the other cheek – do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you. When we read these words, we know these things are hard to do. Jesus was all about loving others, meeting people in the spaces where they lived. The words he speaks to his followers, and to us, are hard to understand and that is why I think they are frequently misconstrued. What are we to do with these statements – loving others is not easy. It is very hard to love those who hate us, hard to love those who abuse us – it's sometimes hard to love those we love!

All of this takes commitment, practice, and hard work. We frequently fail at loving others; we frequently fail at forgiving and showing mercy. God's presence with us changes us, strengthens us to do what is hard. I wonder if it is even possible to love first without being first in relationship with God. With God all things are possible, nothing is impossible for God. So, it makes sense that even loving your enemies, loving the unlovable is possible with God in your life. With God forgiveness is possible, mercy is possible, compassion is possible. Don't sell yourself short – you can do anything with the strength that comes from God. The things Jesus calls his followers to in this section of scripture are the actions that set us apart from the world, actions that show a holiness in our relationship with God. These are the things that we do to enable us to live as followers of Christ and the things that separate us from the sinfulness in our world. "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."