

“Jesus, You Must Be Kidding”
Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
February 24, 2019, 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Based upon Genesis 45:3-15; Luke 6:27-38

I find great comfort, consolation, and relief that nowhere in the Bible does Jesus command us to “Like our enemies.” We only have to love them.

This is a stumbling block passage. One of those scripture texts that sounds like something that God would want and expect from us, and yet to actually pull it off in the way we live sounds impractical, unlikely, and maybe even threatening to our safety and well being.

Love your enemies! Is that what I am supposed to say to the soldier who has just returned home from his second deployment in the Middle East whose entire life has altered because he suffers from PTSD? Jesus, you must be kidding.

Do good to those who hate you! Is that what I am supposed to tell my child struggling in school, afraid to get on that bus every day because there are students who hate her? Jesus, you must be kidding!

Bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you! Is that what I am supposed to say to the gentleman who has been wounded and scarred because as a teenage boy his pastor sexually abused him? Jesus, you must be kidding!

This command just doesn’t seem to hold up in the real world. Did Jesus understand what goes on in this world? Does Jesus want us to be passive doormats for the oppressors, the aggressors, and those who throw their power around exploiting others in their most vulnerable moments?

No, God does not call any of us to be a doormat!!!!

Jesus was not commanding passivity or a “Polyanna” love child approach in responding to the bullies of the world.

So, what was he saying?

Let’s frame this context for a moment.

Part of a society’s effort to establish social order is a Code of Laws. In our country it’s the Constitution.

One of the earliest and most complete legal codes was the Code of Hammurabi written in the 1700s B.C.E. The Code of Hammurabi contained 282 rules. What was prominent in this code was a law of retribution, a form of retaliatory justice that we know as an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

This was an approach to justice, but it largely depended on one's social status. If you and I were of the same social class, and I broke your bone, you would get to break my bone. But if you were of a lower class than I was, I could break your bone, but you wouldn't get to break my bone. I would only have to pay a small fine. So, you can see how the poor and lower classes could be browbeaten because the consequences for violent actions of someone of a higher class were minimal. This was the approach to justice.

The codes changed through the centuries, but the concept of retaliation and an eye for an eye remained prominent with the result often being not justice, but power over the powerless.

In talking with his disciples, Jesus is teaching another way to confront oppressors, a way that is different from an eye for an eye.

Jesus gives examples that would that might seem strange to us, but would have been understandable in first century Palestine.

New Testament scholar, Walter Wink, explains that in first century Palestine, a person's left hand would only be used for dirty work. So, if a master wanted to reprimand a servant, as the servant faced him, he would take the back of his right hand and slap the right cheek. If the servant turns his cheek so that left cheek is facing the master, there would have to be a lot of contortion to be able to slap with the back of the hand. "So why not slap with the palm of the hand, you might say?" Because slapping with the palm of the hand would indicate the person was an equal, and a master would not want to communicate that with a servant. So, the servant resists by turning the left cheek, and it's quite likely that aggressor will become disarmed.

There were also restrictions on how one could collect a debt. Most people who owed money had very little land or money, so clothing was often taken as a way to repay a debt. But the law strictly stated that you would be shamed if you left a debtor naked. So, Jesus sets up a strategy of resistance, "If they ask for your coat, take your shirt off and give them that too." "No, I don't want your shirt. Put it back on." The aggressor becomes diffused, neutralized, deactivated by this resistance and may just give back the coat and the shirt and run to avoid the shame.

Jesus is not teaching to lie down and be a victim, but to find new ways to resist evil refusing to lower oneself to the level of reacting in the way of the aggressors and oppressors.

This is a stumbling block passage from Luke's Gospel, but these were the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's favorite verses from the Bible. He felt strongly that they would only get to where they wanted to be in their movement through love including the love of enemies.

He wrote that every time his organization led a boycott or a protest it would meet for weeks with the community and they would study this passage. He said that the initial reaction of the people was always eye-rolling skepticism. "You have to be kidding, Dr. King. What are we supposed to do when hoses are pointing at us and dogs are snarling?" "Sit down and refuse to return violence for violence," said Dr. King. Returning hate for hate does not drive out hate. Only love drives out hate.

The Greek language uses three words for love. It talks about *eros*, which comes to us as romantic love in all its beauty. But when we speak of loving those who oppose us, we are not talking romantic love. The Greek language talks about *philio*, and this is a reciprocal love between friends—a brotherly or sisterly love. But when we speak of loving those who oppose us, we are not talking about this kind of love either.

The Greek word that Jesus uses in this passage from *Luke* is *agape*. This kind of love is thoughtful, creative, and redemptive. It desires the well being of all people, whether we like them or not. Biblical theologians would say it is the love of God, a divine love working through us and in us. It comes not because we fully understand it, but because we seek to practice it. The more we practice it, the more we understand what Jesus is teaching and the more we understand the reward of which Jesus is speaking.

This love is not stagnant passivity or deadening complacency. It does not negate righteous anger. (Read the *Psalms*. They are packed with righteous anger.) This kind of love does not invalidate indignation over what is wrong. It stands against what is wrong and what is evil but resists without violence. It's non-aggressive physically, but actively engaged spiritually.

Think about what hate does to the hater. Dr. King said, "Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away at our very being." Many of our conflicts are rooted in hate. **The only thing that will drive out hate is love. It does and it will.**

With the clergy abuse that has taken place in the church and the powers who have covered it up, many have asked me how I can go to church on Sundays, much less be a pastor. My answer is "because I need to take the church back for what God intended the church to be: communities who can show the world the love of God."

Oh, how we have failed to do that! And yet, think of all those you know in this very congregation who do manifest the love of God every day. We can't give up on that.

This love of which Jesus is teaching needs to be practiced and nurtured and fed and cultivated. That should happen in our communities of faith. Even in our disagreements we can help each other deepen our understanding of this love to which Jesus calls us.

One of the participants on a mission trip a few years ago commented to me, "You know, I don't tell people that I am a Christian." "Why?" I asked. "Because there were many years when the church inflicted some deep wounds. I felt unworthy, unloved, and despicable. The people didn't want me in their church. But they were quick to talk about their love of Jesus and how much their faith mattered to them. But I think because I am gay, they hated me, and because of that I can't bring myself to say I am a Christian."

I said, "You are so active in your church. You lead many mission trips that your church organizes. You've been asked to be on the session for Pete's sakes. What do you tell people when they ask you about your faith?" He said, "Oh I tell them I am Presbyterian." "Well, that's sort of a Christian," and we laughed.

But then I said, “Listen here! When you go on these trips you manifest the love of God in Jesus Christ with every nail you hammer into place, with every encouragement you give people who are here for the first time, with every hardship and obstacle that gets thrown our way on these trips. Do NOT let people who only call themselves Christians take away the faith identity God has given you because God needs you to show the world what a Christian looks like and you do.”

As I read and listened to the passage from *Genesis*, it sounds as if Joseph immediately, without a second thought, cared for his brothers, loved them, protected them, and kissed them in forgiveness and reconciliation.

I wonder if that’s how it really happened, or was there a moment of conflict in Joseph when he thought, “I’m the one in power now. I need to give these brothers what they deserve.” Did images pop into his brain of his brothers throwing him in a pit, selling him to the Ishmaelites, and dipping his coat in animal blood so his father would think he had been devoured? Joseph could have retaliated; an eye for an eye.

But he didn’t. God had sent him to preserve life not destroy it.

Still, we can understand the inner conflict, and it’s what makes this passage challenging for us.

The mystery novelist, Louise Penny, wrote in her book “The Beautiful Mystery” about a monastery in Quebec established by a group of monks fleeing the Inquisition. It was named Saint Gilbert-Entre-les Loups translated to two wolves intertwined. Throughout the novel the characters wonder how the monastery came to have this name, but everyone is too busy solving the crime so there’s not a lot of attention given to it until the end. The Chief Inspector is walking in the garden with the Abbot, and the Abbott asks him if he’s figured out why the monastery’s emblem is two wolves intertwined.

The Chief Inspector answers, “It probably has to do with taming the wilderness or making friends with it. Is there a biblical illustration with two wolves intertwined?” “No!” says the Abbott. “Actually, it’s a native story that was recounted in one of the early diaries.”

An elder of the native tribe told one of the monk’s that when he was a boy his grandfather came to him one day and said, “Son, there are two wolves inside of me and they are fighting. One wants me to be cruel, fearful, and bitter. The other one wants me to be courageous and patient and loving. They are both very strong.”

The boy thought about it for a few days, and then returned to his grandfather and asked, “So, Grandfather, which of the wolves will win?”

The grandfather answered, “The one that I feed!”

“Love your enemies!” Do you struggle with that? I do! Maybe we can help each other... **because Jesus wasn’t kidding.** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Works Cited

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