

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
February 24, 2019
Luke 6: 27-38
Annual Meeting/Joint Worship

“Hard Lessons to Hear and Obey”

Jesus’ commandment to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse is . . . choose all that apply . . .

1. Unrealistic
2. Reckless
3. A fanciful notion
4. A good idea
5. Inviting harm
6. A practice I need to get better at
7. Something I work hard at
8. Comes naturally to me

Ha! Let’s be honest, no one comes to church on Sunday thinking, “I would really like a challenge today; perhaps I’ll be asked to love my enemy.”

Most of us respond to the words we heard Carolyn and Ken read like children do to seeing cooked spinach on their dinner plate. Blech! Sure, we know cooked spinach is good for us, but we don’t dig into it like we do dessert! So let’s be honest; it’s a struggle to swallow what Jesus serves us in this story. We would much rather hear a lesson on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; because while people giving their just deserts may not be golden, it’s the law we really live by – and most days, want to live by.

But here comes Jesus offering this ridiculous teaching to his closet followers, most of whom probably laughed out loud and with good reason. Because this advice is a recipe for disaster that requires taking an antacid with our cooked spinach!

If we’re honest, we’ll admit that the history of the church (the universal church) is riddled with examples of immorality, corruption and exclusion; times when it definitely didn’t do as Jesus tells us to do. Why, one of the front page news stories this week has been about the unprecedented and historic Vatican summit on

sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. With 190 Catholic leaders gathering at the Vatican this week, victims from around the world have converged on Rome, describing painful experiences at the hands of the church. And the church, as the world knows, has struggled for decades to deal with those situations. But the Catholic Church isn't the only church with struggles. Right now delegates from the United Methodist Church are meeting in St. Louis debating a way forward as they discuss how to be in ministry with LGBTQI people. And the Presbyterian Church has had its share of debates on just how much it's willing to forgive, give, be merciful, and non-judgmental.

But in the midst of it all Jesus has something to us. So he comes off the mountain to preach a sermon on the level plain and in it he plainly levels with us that enemies are not only to be forgiven but, like friends, are to be loved, blessed and prayed for. And while you're at it, turn your cheek, give your coat, and hand over your shirt, to anyone, for all are equal, enemies and friends.

It's hard advice. I'll admit I fail at it more often than I like. Maybe you do, too. But then again . . .

Doesn't Jesus know that if we love the enemy and let down our guard, the enemy may win? That if we love the enemy, the enemy may threaten our well-being? That if we aren't the winner, others may suffer? That if we give away our coat, we may be cold. And then who will give me a coat when I need one? Doesn't Jesus know that if I loan money to someone who doesn't have a job and no prospect of paying me back, that I won't be able to support myself in retirement? That if I turn the other cheek I may be wounded, and that wound could jeopardize me? You know we're all thinking it. I mean, exactly how is this all supposed to work? Won't others be more vulnerable because of my sacrifices? Is that really what the world needs?

Hmm. Good questions.

But the problem is, Jesus isn't asking us to agree with him. Jesus is telling us to love one another. And that goes against the ways of the world. In fact, it's so counter-cultural that we may not be willing to hear him, let alone practice what he preaches.

And yet, these 2000 year old words of Jesus' couldn't be more timely for a world and country that is growing more and more divided. Every day we hear TV pundits attack people on the other side; we hear horrible name calling from our elected officials; and we spend more time fighting about who we're going to exclude than who we're going to include. We do anything but follow Jesus' teaching, and unfortunately some of the biggest offenders are those who call themselves Christian.

Friends, if we're to convince the world of the reality of the gospel, we must live the way of love every day and in all parts of our lives. And that requires us to see all the people, with their differences and their passions.

Recently I read an opinion piece in the New York Times about just this idea, this idea of loving our enemy and seeing past differences. It was written by Phil Klay, a former marine. Titled "What We're Fighting For", he talks about his first-hand experience as a Marine in Iraq from 2003-2007 and the moral demands of being a Marine in war, a demand that includes "respecting the rights of humanity". His words, not mine.

He wrote about witnessing the death of a fellow Marine who was shot by a sniper. Normally when someone dies, a moment of silence and a prayer is offered. But in this case, the very sniper who killed the marine arrived at their base for medical treatment just after the Marine died, and so the doctors and nurses went right to work to save the sniper's life. He wrote:

"They stabilized their enemy and pumped him full of American blood, donated from the "walking blood bank" of nearby Marines. The sniper lived. And then they put him on a helicopter to go to a hospital for follow-up care, and one of the Navy nurses was assigned to be his flight nurse. He told me later of the strangeness of sitting in the back of the helicopter, watching over his enemy lying peacefully unconscious, doped up on painkillers, while he kept checking the sniper's vitals, his blood pressure, and his heartbeat, a heartbeat that was steady and strong thanks to the gift of blood from the Americans this insurgent would have liked to kill.

This wasn't just a couple of marines and sailors making the right decision, he wrote. These weren't acts of exceptional moral courage . . . This was standard policy, part of the tradition stretching back to the Revolutionary War, when

George Washington ordered every soldier in the Continental Army to sign a copy of rules intended to limit harm to civilians and to ensure that their conduct respected what he called the “rights of humanity”, so that their restraint “justly secured to us the attachment of all good men.”

Klay concluded by saying, “From the beginning we have made these kinds of moral demands on our soldiers. It starts with the oath they swear to uphold the Constitution, an oath made not to a flag, or to a piece of ground, or to an ethnically distinct people, but to a set of principles established in our founding documents. An oath that demands a commitment to democracy, to liberty, to the rule of law, and to the self-evident equality of all men. The Marines I knew fought for, and some of them died, for these principles.” (Phil Klay, “What We’re Fighting For”, February 10, 2017)

Friends, the actions of the marine cuts across the grain of our natural response as much as Jesus’ words about loving our enemy and turning the other cheek do. This is more than treating others as we want to be treated; this is a radical new interpretation of the Golden Rule. This is more than treating nicely those who have been nice to us. Jesus is telling us to do good to those who do bad to us.

You know, sometimes Christians get the idea that being a Christian just means being nice to others; or merciful to others; or even generous to others. As if the point of the church is just to be nicer than anyone else. But the point isn’t to be nice; the point of it all is to model for the world who God is; the point is to say to the world “this is what God looks like.” And the God we believe in is a God who is merciful . . . to everyone . . . even our enemies. Whose grace is greater than anyone person’s sin. Who loves us all, not because of what we’ve done, achieved, or claimed, but solely because that’s who God is.

These words from Jesus which sound so bizarre, are just what we need to hear when name-calling, slander and insults are more and more commonplace. When we’re more divided as a nation than united; when being compassionate has become political; and when hearing and seeing and listening to people with whom we differ is an anomaly.

The challenge for the church in these times is to remember what we’re about. And we are about what is central to Jesus: about justice and compassion and

kindness, and walking humbly and making sure the poor are cared for, the excluded included, and the children nurtured.

The challenge is for the church to remember that it is not about itself. It is not even about religion. It is about Jesus Christ.

And there is a personal challenge here, too. Jesus' sermon on ethics makes me uncomfortable precisely because it is so hard to live up to, so high an ideal to achieve, and many days I don't achieve it. To be honest, some days licking the wounds of my anger feels better than trying to reconcile a broken relationship. Some days going through the motions of being religious is easier than changing my attitude. But Jesus calls for an inwardly transformed person, not just an outwardly obedient one.

A generation ago Dorothy Sayers wrote these words that are timely for us today:

The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to succeeding generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. . . . a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, humble; but he insulted clergymen . . . ; referred to King Herod as “that fox”; went to parties in disreputable company . . . ; assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the temple. . . . Officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (The Greatest Drama Ever Staged)

And so Jesus preaches a sermon on ethics to startle us, to challenge us, and to transform us. He comes and makes detached neutrality impossible. He comes to you and me and forces us to decide whether or not to be his follower, his man, his woman.

So he comes to the sanctuary of your heart and mine and invites us to make the most important decision you and I can ever make—to follow him, and to be transformed, forever.

Amen.