

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
February 23, 2025
Luke 6: 27-38

Loving God, we come before You today with open hearts, ready to hear Your Word. You call us to love in ways that challenge us, to invite, to welcome, and to see one another as You see us. Give us the courage to follow Jesus' example, even when it is difficult. May Your Spirit move among us, shaping us into people of kindness, mercy, and radical love. Amen.

“Are You Talking To Me?”

Most of us respond to the words we just heard 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! Let's be honest; it's a struggle to swallow what Jesus serves us today. We would much rather hear a lesson on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; because while giving people their just desserts 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 with good reason. Because this advice is a recipe for disaster that requires taking an antacid with our cooked spinach!

Jesus preaches this difficult message in his Sermon the Plain, and in this sermon Jesus plainly levels with us that enemies are not only to be forgiven but 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 our enemy and let down our guard, our enemy may win? That if we aren't the winner, others may suffer? That if we give away our coat, we may be cold. 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? That if I turn the other cheek I may be wounded? You know we're

all thinking it. I mean, exactly how is this all supposed to work and how far am I supposed to take it? Is this foolish talk really what the world needs?

And yet, these 2000 year old words of Jesus's couldn't be more timely for a world and country that is so divided I wonder if we'll ever come back from the brink.

Recently, I read an article by David Brooks in *The Atlantic* titled "*How America Got Mean.*" In it, Brooks explores the erosion of moral character in our society and how we have become increasingly disconnected from one another. He argues that as individualism has grown, our sense of shared responsibility and community has weakened. We've moved away from the deep-rooted values that sustain kindness, trust, and goodwill, and instead, we now live in a culture where people are more inclined to view others as obstacles rather than neighbors. The result? A society where resentment flourishes, polarization deepens, and mercy is in short supply.

Brooks' article speaks directly to the challenge of Jesus' words: love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and give without expecting anything in return. It is the exact opposite of how the world often operates. When we are hurt, our instinct is to seek revenge. When we are wronged, fairness tells us to demand justice. But Jesus isn't asking for fairness—he's calling us to something far more radical. He's inviting us to a love that defies logic, a love that looks beyond personal offense and seeks the good of the other, even when it's undeserved.

A few years ago I read an opinion piece in the New York Times that has stuck with me all these years. I can't remember if I've shared it before, but it certainly goes along with what Jesus is preaching today. 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. But when we abandon Jesus’s words; When we stop seeing people as worthy of grace, when we choose contempt over compassion, we contribute to the very breakdown that Jesus warned against. Jesus says: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”. The world may teach us to hold grudges, or to return insult for insult, but Jesus calls us to a deeper, more courageous love. The kind of love that refuses to reduce people to their worst moments. The kind of love that acknowledges that mercy, not retribution, is what ultimately changes hearts. It’s a way of living that isn’t based on transaction, but on transformation. And it’s the only way to

heal what is broken, to mend what is divided, and to show the world what the gospel truly looks like in action.

And it is more than treating others as we want to be treated; 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. And that's hard.

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 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 has become 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: loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who abuse us.

And there is a personal challenge here, too. Jesus' sermon 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. After all, it's easy to love those who love me. But to love those who hate me? Now that is hard. And 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.

Friends, the challenge of Luke 6 is not an easy one, but it is the path we are called to walk. It's the only way to heal what is broken, to mend what is divided, and to show the world what the gospel truly looks like in action.

And sometimes, that action can be as simple as an invitation.

Recently, a man named Doug went viral on Instagram—not for some grand act of heroism or a controversial take, but for something refreshingly simple: he invited all his neighbors to a winter party. Doug didn't know them all personally. He didn't know their politics, their beliefs, or whether they would even show up. But he invited them anyway, because he wanted to be a good neighbor. His invitation was warm, open, and, best of all, lighthearted—it read, *"4 p.m. until the cops come."* Which was especially sweet, considering Doug is fairly old and not exactly the type to throw a rager that would warrant a police visit!

Doug's invitation struck a chord with people because it was such a rare example of what we all long for—connection beyond divisions, hospitality without conditions. He wasn't concerned with whether his guests were just like him. He wasn't interested in drawing lines between who was in and who was out. He simply opened his home, his life, and his heart to the people around him.

And isn't that exactly what Jesus is calling us to do? To live in a way that extends love first, without hesitation, without needing to know if it will be reciprocated? To be the kind of people who invite, who welcome, who love—because that's who God is.

Loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, giving without expecting anything in return—these aren't impossible ideals. They're choices we make, every day, in small and simple ways. Maybe we start with an invitation. Maybe we start by seeing our neighbors not as strangers or opponents, but as people worthy of kindness.

Because in the end, the way we heal this world isn't through retaliation or division. It's through radical, reckless, Jesus-shaped love. So let's go and live that love. Let's go and be good neighbors. Amen.

Gracious God, Help us to be good neighbors, to invite and include, and to live in a way that reflects Your grace. May our words and actions bring healing, hope, and kindness to the world around us. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.