

Sermon
March 8, 2020

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Loving Our Enemies
Luke 6:27-35

Love your enemies. This may be one of Jesus' most counter-cultural statements and if we are honest one of the hardest things for us to do. And yet here it is at the very beginning of his ministry. Right after he called the twelve disciples Jesus stood on the plain and explained what it would mean to follow him. In the passage we looked at last week the last of the four blessings had to do with the very people Jesus is talking about here -

Blessed are you when people hate you,
and when they exclude you, revile you,
and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

And now Jesus told them they were to love these very people. And friends, that means we too as Christ's disciples are to love our enemies. There is no denying this is hard to do. Our natural inclination is to strike back when someone spews hate in our direction. Or when we are excluded by someone's prejudice or disdain. We learn that early as children when a group of peers mocks or jeers us or doesn't choose us to be a friend. We live in a world today where many choose sides and belittle those who are different. But friends, Jesus calls us to a different way of life.

What I want us to note today is Jesus doesn't just say love your enemies. It isn't just a passing comment for Jesus. He explains how, why and then models for us what he means.

First, Jesus tells us how to love our enemies. He gives specific examples.

Do good to those who hate you. It is not hard to tell when someone feels animosity toward us and we don't like it. Our first inclination is to strike back. But what Christ tells us to do is to be nice to them. Be kind. Be generous. Do good. It can totally change a situation.

One of my favorite authors is Louise Penny. She writes a series called the Bredon Chronicles on one families' experiences through the Civil War and Reconstruction. A time in our countries life when there was a great deal of animosity and fear. Her main character Carrie grew up on a plantation in Richmond where her best friend was a slave. Carrie became a female doctor - before that was a normal accepted practice - after being called on to nurse patients on both sides of the fight during the war. In addition as the years progress she made difficult powerful decisions to offer medical help even to those who were part of killing her husband and threatening all she loved. The difference it made in her community through the years reveals the importance of what Christ taught. Friends, if we choose love and not hate it can change the world little by little. Jesus went on....

Bless those who curse you. Friends, words hurt more than we like to admit. And yet Christ calls us to bless those who call us names. We are called to remember that every person is a child of God - made in God's image and each person has value. Often at the root of evil words there is a deep hurt in that person. They have not been taught to love or may have experienced great pain. How are they to learn unless we offer kindness and care to them. And if we do - if we respond to those unkind words with love - often their anger can be diffused and we can learn what is beneath those hurtful words - a lack of self-esteem, a life of pain and hurt, a need for love. And we can be part of helping them to learn a different way of life.

Pray for those who abuse you. Friends, if we believe in prayer then we believe prayer changes things. But we don't just pray for ourselves or that others will be changed to suit us. We pray that we will be changed also. That we might be able to overcome our initial reactions, our own anger and animosity and to see the other person through God's eyes. We are also asking God to work in that person's life and to soften their hearts enabling them to see that there is a better way to treat people. God can change people and so we pray that God will work within the situation to open all our hearts to

a kinder more gracious way of life. When we pray for those who are our adversaries we are inviting God to come into the situation and make all things new. Prayer is our way of acknowledging our own sinfulness and weakness and asking for God's strength not to become like our adversaries. But to take a higher road - the road that Christ models for us.

Jesus doesn't just tell us to love our enemies. He gives specific examples of how to put this love into action.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. Jesus is not condoning physical abuse but he is talking about not retaliating. I love basketball and it is time for March madness and that means lots of basketball! And very good basketball! Often in sports it is the person who is retaliating who gets the penalty for the first actual foul gets missed by the officials. Retaliation only gets us into more hot water. It does nothing to solve the issue. And so we must learn to walk away and not retaliate when anger erupts. It takes more courage and strength.

And from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. A spirit of generosity that exceeds the expected is what Jesus is talking about. We are to give not just our coats but all our clothing. We are to lend expecting nothing in return.

Remember the famous French musical Les Miserables, Victor Hugo's story? Jean Valjean is a thief in search of personal redemption. No one will give him a chance except a Bishop of the Church. The bishop takes him in, has him dine on fine china and expensive silverware, and sends him to bed with his best candlesticks. The temptation is too much for this lifelong thief. So he takes the silverware and runs. Soon there is a knock on the Bishop's door. The cops have the robber and need only the Bishop's identification to throw Jean Valjean back in prison. But the Bishop surprises everyone. He brings the candlesticks and says to Jean Valjean, I gave these to you as well. They are silver like the

rest and would bring you 200 francs. I intended for you to take them. Here, take them too.

(<https://sermons.com/sermon/radical-love-is-risky-series-radical-love-in-a-risky-world/1441769>)

That is what Jesus is talking about here. A generosity of spirit put into action. And it is a generosity that is counter-cultural. It goes further than loving those who love you - giving to family and friends. Christ challenges us to love and to be generous even with our enemies.

Jesus not only tells us how to love our enemies providing examples but he tells us why. The very last line of this passage is one we might miss because what has come before is so filled with powerful statements. But listen again to it.

*“Your reward will be great,
and you will be children of the Most High;
for he (that is God) is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”*

Friends, we are to love our enemies because God loves even those who are ungrateful and do wrong. God’s love is broader and deeper than we can even imagine.

Remember the story of Jonah. Jonah ended up in the belly of the large fish because he knew this truth about God. He knew that God loved the people of Ninevah even though they had caused so much pain and heartache to the people of Israel. And he did not want to preach God’s word to them. After he was spewed out of the mouth of the fish God called him a second time to go to Ninevah. The people repented and Jonah became angry and pouted under the broom tree. Hear his powerful words:

*“I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and ready to relent from punishing.”*

Friends, we are to love as God loved us. God loved us enough to give up his Son for us. We are called to love everyone including our enemies like God loves us.

And yet God understands how hard this is for us. God sent his Son into the world to teach us - to show us how to love as he loves us. That is the real power behind this teaching by Jesus. For Jesus not only explained to the disciples how to love enemies. He not only told them why they should learn to love their enemies. But Jesus also modeled how to do just that throughout his life. When the Pharisees and the scribes questioned him and tried to trap him Jesus responded with kindness and truth. He didn't retaliate against them or strike out. His goal was always to model a loving spirit and to cause those who struck out to consider a different way of life. Jesus' very life was filled with doing good, blessing those who cursed him, praying for those who were his antagonists even from the cross. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane he did not condone violence and healed the ear of the soldier who had come to arrest him. His generous spirit is a model for us and something to aspire to.

Friends, we are called to love our enemies. The world encourages something different. And yet this teaching is foundational to our Christian faith. It is what we are called to do. For it is the way forward for our world.

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years in farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm.

That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now it is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence--an 8-foot fence so I won't need to see his place anymore. Cool him down anyhow."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you." The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing.

About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge, a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other. A fine piece of work--handrails and all--and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge and then they met in the middle, took each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder, "No wait, stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many bridges to build." (Author Unknown.

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<http://www.witandwisdom.org> retrieved from <https://sermons.com/sermon/the-bridge-builder/1347621>)

Friends, loving our enemies is the way we build a bridge that can heal our world of hatred and animosity. That is what God knew and Christ modeled for us. There is a more excellent way to live and it starts with each of us loving our enemies as Christ loved his. May we become bridge builders in our homes, our communities and our world.