

Luke 6:27-36
No Small Task
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There's a story I heard about a man stranded alone on a desert island. And one day a ship happened to be passing by and seeing his SOS, came ashore to rescue him. When help arrived, they saw that he had built for himself 3 small huts. One of the rescuers asked what each of the huts were.

"This one is where I live, my home; and this one is my church it's where I go to worship on Sunday."

"So what's the third hut?" one of the rescuers asked.

"Oh, that's my old church."

And what this little story tells me is that relationships can be hard. Sometimes the challenge can be with someone else, but sometimes the challenge is inside of me. The question I want to place before us today is: What does it look like for us to be people who are led by Jesus' call to uncommon forgiveness and reconciliation, particularly towards those who we consider our enemies?

So, as you are able, I invite you to please stand out of reverence and respect for the reading of God's word, and turn with me to Luke chapter 6 continuing at verse 27. When I'm done reading I'll say "this is the word of the Lord," if you believe it to be true, you can respond by saying "Thanks be to God."

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic^[b] either. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

³²"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ³⁵But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

I'm reading a powerful and challenging book right now called *Exclusion and Embrace* by a Theologian named Miroslav Volf. He opens by telling a story about a lecture he gave on embracing our enemies. When it came time for question and answer time someone asked: 'But can you embrace a Chetnik?' Volf is from the former Yugoslavia, and back in the 90s Chetniks were Serbian fighters who were destroying his homeland of Yugoslavia. He says that in this moment he struggled for an answer to the question, to which he ultimately answered: "No, I cannot. But as a follow of Christ I think I should be able to."

What an interesting and honest answer. Relationships are hard, especially when those relationships are pushed to their limits, where not just feelings, but lives get hurt. And I think that if we are being honest we can probably really resonate with this. Sometimes forgiveness is not humanly possible. But as people who follow Jesus, is there a resource beyond our own that can move us toward that radical embrace? Perhaps it is possible for us to dare to hope. So this morning I would like to look at what it might be like for us to be people who embody relationships—even with our enemies—that challenge us to go deeper with one another and with Jesus.

Jesus begins with a phrase he uses numerous times throughout the Gospels: **“I say to you who hear”** (other places he’ll use the phrase, let he/she who has ears let them hear.) There is so much in our lives that is competing for our attention, the number of messages we have to process on a daily basis is staggering. Which voices do we pay attention to, and whose will we pay attention to? I love that when others raise their voices to be heard, it’s almost as if God lowers his voice.

It reminds of the story from 1 Kings 19 when God says to the prophet Elijah I’m going to pass by, stand in the mouth of this cave. When the time came God’s voice wasn’t in the wind, it wasn’t in the earthquake, it wasn’t in the roaring fire. Finally, in the sound of a low whisper does God invite Elijah to listen and hear.

So many voices demanding to be recognized, and it’s so tempting to be drawn into the fear and anxiousness of our day. But as he does so often Jesus doesn’t elevate the volume of conversation, but lowers his voice to a whisper, that we might truly hear.

I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

In these two verses, we hear Jesus present four seemingly antithetical responses. His hearers would have been well acquainted with what I’ll call the OT version of Justice. This is Exodus 21 justice: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Here Jesus departs from retributive or retaliatory justice to present a different way, the way peace instead of hostility, the way of love and not hate.

However, a couple things need clarified before we can pursue this kind of life. First we must answer the question: “Who is the enemy?” For Miroslav Volf the enemy were those who committed these unthinkable acts. And we can look down through history, particularly the Twentieth Century and see example after sad example of how this happens. The question of forgiveness and peaceful resistance in situations of war and genocide is a huge moral and ethical debate, one that I don’t have the time or ability to effectively grapple today.

Instead, for us today I want to focus on those relationships with which we deal on a daily basis. What about those with whom we interact regularly within our community, within our church? It’s so easy for us to allow little seeds of division, a little thoughtless word or deed (which we’re all capable of) can begin to germinate and take root in bitterness. We may not even realize it, but we may have turned another person into our enemy. What about those with whom we interact through social media? This is a really easy space in which to discover new enemies, because we interact with

one another not in physical presence but disembodied digital presence. Every time I see this picture I get a chuckle.

What about these people with whom we vehemently disagree? While we may not call them our enemies out loud, I think that the way we build up walls among each other and exclude one another reveals that perhaps in a way, we do perceive them as our enemies. They may be given many labels, Liberal, Conservative, Pro-Life, Pro-Choice, Gun-Control, Second Amendment Rights, Environmentalist, Free Market Capitalist, Cubs Fan, Yankees Fan, and so on. Perhaps, if you are like me just the mere mention of these categories has caused your heartrate to quicken.

How do we deal with those who have either built up walls to exclude us, or whom we have built walls to exclude? This, it seems, is where Christianity gets really challenging.

Before I say more about how I believe Jesus calls us to respond, I want to acknowledge the damage that has been done to individuals by perhaps well-intentioned, but misguided pastors and Christian leaders. When people are instructed to return to an abusive spouse and told to forgive him, without an acknowledgement of the sin committed, because that's what Jesus would do—or worse to believe that her actions were the cause of the abuse. This is spiritual violence. Or when someone is asked to overlook a significant breach of trust that causes great hardship to another, because the person simply needs another chance to make the right decision. These types of counsel look less like biblical forgiveness and restoration, and more like spiritual abuse.

But for those everyday experiences where people intentionally or unintentionally injure us, how do we grow towards this invitation to forgive that Jesus presents? I believe there are two movements Jesus suggests within this text that give us a clue: One is a turning to see; the other is a decision to remain.

First, choosing to see. In 29 Jesus says when someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other as well; to one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic. Give to everyone who begs from you. The implied action that is taking place in each one of these instructions is this: we don't run away, but we turn to see the other. Look and see the one who has need, the one who takes, see the one who injures you. In each of these Jesus invites us to turn our faces towards our enemy, that we might see them, and they might see us. And the kind of love they see in us is the same kind of love we see when we look in the eyes of Jesus. The kind that, as the Gospel of John writes, is full of Grace and Truth.

In the monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of Mt Sinai in Egypt there is this Icon. It's called *Christ Pantocrator*. Pantocrator is a Greek word that means *Ruler of all*. As you can see in this icon from the Orthodox Church, Jesus with his left hand is holding a book, and his right hand is doing something interesting with his fingers.

But the real significance of this piece is in the eyes. Do you see that his eyes are different? His left eyebrow is cocked, there is a fiery intensity to it, they call this the eye of Judgment or the eye of truth. This is the eye of God's righteousness and justice. The one who encircles us with the law is the righteous judge of good and evil, sin and righteousness. And his other eye, the right eye, you can see is relaxed and gentle. This is the eye of mercy, the eye of grace. This is the eye that looked out from the cross and declared it is finished, and that grace now had the last word.

These are the eyes through which Jesus sees us, as John 1:14 says full of grace and truth. And what you see in this depiction is this beautiful dialectic of God's mercy and God's judgment, and how Jesus is always holding them in tension. Which eye do we lean towards?

Someone was creative and they cut Jesus' face in half and mirrored each side. On the right, you have what I would call the sentimental Jesus, this is the one who is always clapping for us, affirming who we are, but ultimately never requiring anything of us—Jesus without any teeth. When you mirror the left side, this what you get. I call this linebacker Jesus. His hair kind of looks like a helmet, his neck is strained, and it looks like he's wearing a breastplate for battle. This is the Jesus who looks like he's ready to rub our noses in the turf.

What this image teaches us, I believe is that in our relationships, the goal of our Christian life is to allow the Spirit to mold us in this tension that Jesus naturally embodies, Spirit and truth. Jesus didn't merely allow himself to be walked over, taken advantage of, and crucified because he was showing us how to be nice and compliant. He was showing us the radical nature of God's kingdom, that it will always have unorthodox means by which it is revealed—not by retaliation (eye for an eye), but by this act of restoring relationships (forgiveness and mercy). In this way, we turn to face our enemies.

But the second thing I notice about these verses is the decision to remain, rather than flee or segment. To those who we perceive or decide are enemies to us, it can be all too easy to write them off and say I'll just make a point to avoid and never have any contact with these. I'll surround myself with only people who make me feel safe and confirm all of my perceptions about the world—and in this way, I'll be protected from being hurt. True, but you also might be shielded from God's work of reconciliation in the world.

In the verses that follow Jesus says, "Listen loving those who love you, being good to those who do good to you, lend to those who lend to you, what good is this?" What I hear in these verses is Jesus challenging us not to separate into little cliques of those who look and feel and think the same as us.

It is much more difficult to make an enemy out of someone who you see and someone with whom you must deal on a daily basis. Again, I wish it were easier, but this is the challenging spiritual work of being a Christian. When we pray the Lord's Prayer each week we do not pray Thy Kingdom come, thy people be joined in heaven away from the ugliness things on earth. No, as we pray the Lord's prayer we are inviting God to continue the work of reforming this world, our relationships, our communities, on earth as it is in heaven. And the vessels God uses for God's great reforming are you and me, in the power of the Holy Spirit given by King Jesus, whose last words to his disciples were: "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me, now I give it to you, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them all that I have commanded you. And lo I am with you until the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

During the first half of the last century, a young German Theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a remarkable impact on the world, in a relatively short life. Bonhoeffer became a pastor and teacher around the time the Third Reich came to power and until 1938 Bonhoeffer's message to his students and his congregations was always: We overcome evil "by forgiving it without end," and, he continued, we forgive without end by "seeing our enemies as they really are as

those for whom Christ died, whom Christ loves. “Victory over enemies, in Bonhoeffer’s 1938 estimation, comes by allowing Christ’s love to be victorious over them, not by killing them. But in the events of the Kristallnacht (the night in which storm troopers garnered the aid of civilians in the destruction of synagogues, stores, and homes of Jews across Germany) Bonhoeffer’s thinking changed. No longer could the church be “dishonorably silent” he said. This change of mind came after he had accepted the invitation to come to America to preach and lecture in New York City. He realized that he needed to be back in his home joined in the resistance to overthrow Hitler.

In a letter he wrote to one of his colleagues he says this:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people....Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and joined the effort to remove Hitler, for which he was ultimately taken into concentration camp and executed. But for him and for us taking responsible action meant first of all choosing to remain in the place where Christ’s life living in us might take effect in our world.

This is no doubt the most difficult dilemma of our faith, but we do not face it alone. For Christ, by His Spirit has promised to give us the strength and wisdom we need to see and be seen through the eyes of his spirit and truth, justice and mercy. Is forgiving our enemies easy or even possible for us? I don’t know that it is, but with Jesus’ help perhaps it may be possible.