

Do Unto Others

Luke 6:27-38
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First Presbyterian Church
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In the collection titled “Writings of the Desert Fathers & Mothers,” a 5th century monk named Abba Zeno says, “If a man wants God to hear his prayer quickly, then before he prays for anything else – even his own soul – when he stands and stretches out his hands toward God, he must pray with all his heart for his enemies. Through this action God will hear everything that he asks.”¹ “Love your enemies,” says Jesus, “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Not easy stuff. I mean, you might be able to find it in heart to bless your enemies, even pray for your enemies but actually going out of your way to do something nice for them, that seems unlikely, impossible.

That’s why Jesus begins his teaching saying, “But I say to you that listen....” Jesus knows that some will not listen, that some just can’t accept this teaching about how to live in a world where not everyone acts as they should. Jesus came into the world precisely because not everyone is acting as they should. He came to set things right.

This means that he had to live among his enemies – those Pharisees who twisted his every word and tried to trick him and trip him up; the Roman Empire that exploited and dominated ordinary people like Jesus and his friends and neighbors; the crowds who gathered to see the famous teacher and healer only to turn on him when challenged to follow to the end’s of the earth, the end of his earthly life; and even the disciples who couldn’t stay awake in his hour of need or stand with him in his persecution.

Most people in his day didn’t really listening to Jesus, hear what he had to say, understand what he was trying to tell them. Jesus was giving them the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the secret of living a good life, the means of achieving peace on earth, and they didn’t get it.

Do we? Do we understand what Jesus is teaching in today’s New Testament lesson – how to live a blessed life, how to enjoy heaven on earth? I don’t think so. I think the world at large and even we as individuals don’t get it at all, or at least, we’re not fully up to the challenge.

For most people, loving your enemies is a nice thought, but a hard thing to put into action. And yet, that’s exactly what Jesus says we must do. “Do good to those who hate you,” says Jesus. “If anyone strikes you on the cheek,” don’t fight back or seek revenge. If someone “takes ... your coat,” don’t try to get it back; ask if they need your shirt, too, and give it to them, in loving kindness. “Give to everyone who begs” – no questions asked.

¹ Keith Beasley-Topliffe, ed., *Writings of the Desert Fathers & Mothers* (Upper Room Books, 2017).

“If anyone takes ... your (stuff),” let them enjoy it in good health and don’t ask for anything in return. That just seems so pie-in-the-sky, doesn’t it? Where does Jesus think he is –heaven on earth? Believe me, this isn’t heaven on earth. Never was, ever since that Garden of Eden business. Does he really accept all or even most people to be that goodie-two-shoes? It just doesn’t work, does it? It’s not practical. It’s not reasonable, thinking that just because you and I treat people in a Christlike manner, they will actually change their ways. They won’t, not enough of them to make a difference in this world. History shows us that.

And if we’re honest with ourselves, we’re really not up to the task, either-not completely and whole heartedly. We’re too caught up in the system of give-and-take, tit-for-tat, fair-is-fair. It’s impossible to let all that go and become as altruistic as Jesus says.

And he knows this. Jesus isn’t kidding himself, thinking that we’re ever going to overcome human nature, survival-of-the-fittest. He knows we’re too invested in things as they are to turn our backs on the social and economic systems that make the world go ’round. In fact, Jesus uses our instinct for survival and our dependence on social and economic systems to motivate us to do the right thing, even when it’s not easy, even when it’s not fair, even when we’re tempted to hit back.

In making his case for us to do the hard work of creating heaven on earth, Jesus appeals to our human nature, saying, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? ... If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? ... If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?”

Jesus knows we need to get something in return, we want credit for the things we do right. And we expect to be punished for the things we do wrong. So even his “Do to others as you would have them do to you” argument doesn’t work so well. At best, we do to others what we would expect to be done to us. If someone steals they ought to go to jail, just as we’d expect to go to jail for stealing. Fair is fair, at best.

And at worst, there are those individuals who do to others before they do it to them. I gotta get mine before someone else takes it all. If I don’t get ahead of you, I’ll be stuck behind. Nobody’s looking out for me, so I can’t wait time looking out for others, putting their interests ahead of my own, being happy for those who are blessed when my life seems to be cursed. We like things to be fair, even if that means getting revenge.

Take for instance, the woman with a fatal disease whose husband already had his eye on the neighbor lady next door. She hired a portrait painter and asked if he could paint a picture of her with a gorgeous diamond and sapphire necklace around her neck. He said of course, and asked to see the necklace. “Oh, I don’t own such a necklace,” she said.

“But after I die and my husband marries the neighbor lady, she’s going to see this painting and spend the rest of her life looking for that necklace.”

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” It’s just not how the world works. So Jesus uses our sense of fairness as incentive for us to step it up a bit, quite a bit, all the way to heaven, here on earth. Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return.” And then he assure us, saying, “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.”

In other words, the only way for us to step out of the world as it is is to step into the world as it will become – on earth as it is in heaven, when all people will recognize themselves as children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

That’s what we do here at church – we practice being brothers and sisters in Christ, we look to God for guidance and protection and provision, and we try to take this way of being out with us in the world, in how we deal with our neighbors, how we act at school or work or volunteering, how we treat our family and friends, and how we approach our household role and duties, as a spouse, parent, aunt or uncle, sibling and child.

Yes, we practice and practice and practice being a good Christian, and still we fall short – holding grudges, pushing ahead, taking what’s not ours, lashing out, slacking off. And yet, there is one concept from Jesus’ teaching today that we haven’t looked at. When Jesus says, “Do not judge, ... do not condemn ... forgive...,” he’s pointing us to the most powerful way we can enjoy a true sense of heaven here on earth.

Can you imagine if we just didn’t judge others, didn’t condemn them but instead tried to be understanding and forgiving? That would make a huge difference in our lives and in this world – neighbor vs. neighbor, brother vs. brother, vaxxers vs. anti-vaxxers, maskers vs. anti-maskers, Republicans vs. Democrats, liberals vs. conservatives, the ultra-rich vs. the middle class, nation against nation. So much of the tension and fighting we see today would just fade away if we weren’t so judgy, so self-righteous.

That’s the vision God has for this world, a world of peace and joy and plenty. It’s a world where forgiveness overflows from one person to the next to the next to the next and across the globe, a world where peace prevails and wars cease, a world where no one has want of anything they truly need.

You may think this is just a dream, a nice thought that’s really not possible as things are these days. And you’d be right, as far as that goes. But with God, all things are possible.

Even things like loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, giving to those who ask of you, and not judging and condemning others just because they think or act or live differently than you. Now that would be heaven on earth. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, we have been recipients of the choicest blessings of heaven. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten God.

We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.

It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

We pray, also, Lord, for our friends and family, for those grieving the loss of loved ones, those recovering from illness and injury, those battling disease. All of this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.