

Struggling to Love the Enemy Luke 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany/ 24th February 2019

There's no way to avoid it—this is a difficult, demanding text. It could go in the category: Things I Wish Jesus Never Said. You know, that would make for an interesting sermon series: Things I Wish Jesus Never Said. It would be challenging to preach and to hear, but that kind of honesty is required, I think, when it comes to a text such as this.

Sure, we know what Jesus asks of us. We know what the Bible says. But, often, we ignore what he says, ignore this verse, conveniently forget it or look the other way. It's a nice ideal, we think, something we should all aspire toward. But then our realistic, or, worse, cynical voice breaks through and says, "But who could really live this way?" Jesus, of course; but he was "perfect," we say, he was sinless, he's the Son of God, it's easy for him. Loving our enemies? Are you serious? No way—not today, not with what I've experienced, not with what I've seen, not with what's been done to me.

So, then what do we do as followers of Jesus? Can we pick and choose the verses we like, the teachings that confirm our worldview, the commands that we like, and set aside the more difficult ones? The English playwright, G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), famously said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹

I get what Chesterton is getting at, about it being difficult and left untried. But Jesus never offered his teaching to his disciples as an ideal, that is, something to be aspired toward but never fully realized. Jesus *expected* his disciples to live this way. And he knew what we're capable of, with God's help. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you..." (Lk 6:27). He also called us to forgive those we hate (or who hate us).

Still, it's tough to hear this text. And it's tough to preach on this text—because it's so complicated: theologically, psychologically, emotionally. It's a text that is prone to misunderstanding and abuse. And we must be careful that we hear the spirit of the text and not get bogged down in a literal reading. "Bless those who curse you," Jesus says, "pray for those who abuse you" (Lk. 6:28). Sadly, this verse can so easily be taken out of context. In this climate of #MeToo and greater, needed, awareness of abuse, when the evils of abuse are being exposed in so many corners of our society, including within the walls of the church—we could also say #ChurchToo—Jesus' command to love, to bless, to pray for the abuser sounds unethical, even cruel. Consider how a text such as this spoken at Pope Francis' summit on sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, held this past week at the Vatican. The abused, if he or she is a Christian, might feel compelled to forgive. But what if that is not possible, not yet—or not ever, maybe—will that, then, not generate more guilt or feelings of inadequacy for a Christian?

This is difficult. I, we, know what the text says. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, and to forgive. "Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you" (Lk. 6:37b-38a). Jesus is extremely radical here and suggests that the standard by which we judge another human

being, the degree to which we withhold forgiveness, the degree to which we withhold blessing is the same standard, the same measure God uses toward us. What you give (or don't give) is what you get (or don't get). This, too, is tough to hear.

A disciple of Jesus loves the enemy and offers forgiveness. But Jesus doesn't say, *when*, or how soon. And I'm grateful for this because I have found that sometimes Christians forgive too soon. I've known Christians who think they need to go straight from wrong to forgiveness, right away. But there's a problem with this, because forgiving too soon preempts our ability to be angry, it hinders us from honoring the hurt, recognizing the wrong that was done, and acknowledging how we feel. Dissociating the wrong from the feelings associated with it is not good.

Years ago, I came across a book with a great title, *Don't Forgive Too Soon*, written by Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn, counselors/therapists who are also faithful Christians. We often rush to forgiveness because we think it's the "Christian" thing to do, and because we really don't want to sit with our hurt. Sometimes we move too quickly through the forgiveness process, and then we discover later that we're still harboring resentment and anger, because the wound is still there. We need to remember that anger can be a gift in that it "locates our wound, helps us defend ourselves and energizes us to correct what needs correction." This is especially true with regard to abuse. "In an abusive situation," they suggest, "we have no right to forgive until we have honored our anger. Anger at abuse and injustice is an expression of our integrity and our dignity as human beings. We must honor our anger before we forgive because authentic forgiveness comes from the same place of integrity deep within us."²

This is why I am always cautious here. I rarely tell a person they need to extend forgiveness. I have come to know from my own life, dealing with hurts and wounds, and my enemies, that the only way we can move beyond hate, alienation, and separation is to learn to love more deeply, and, in God's good time—and with God's help—extend forgiveness. I might suspect or even believe that forgiveness is ultimately the way forward for someone, but I would never—or rarely—say someone should, right now, forgive. We need to get to that place of forgiveness on our own, when the timing is right, when we have honored our anger, when we have become clear that we can't do anything about the one who hates us or wronged us. There comes a time when we have to let it go.

In Anne Lammott, in her spiritual memoir *Traveling Mercies*, in her typically vivid, provocative fashion, says withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.³

The maverick Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests, "Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so *not* okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.?' Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others

do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And *that's* worth fighting for.”⁴

But, love your enemies? Forgive them? Who is your enemy? Do you have enemies? Who is Jesus talking about? Just prior to the morning's text, in what's known as the Sermon on the Plain—Luke's version of the Beatitudes, filled with both blessings and woes—Jesus said, “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (Lk. 6:26). Did you hear that? Woe to you when people speak well of you, when they like you, admire you, approve of you. Is Jesus suggesting that we're supposed to have people who dislike us, who are our enemies? And then in the next verse, Jesus says to love the very ones who hate him and hate his followers. Jesus is talking about loving those who hate them *because* they are followers of him. At the time Luke was written, Jesus was considered cursed for being crucified, and Luke is saying his followers should expect the same.

In other words: Expect people to hate you for serving the Lord of love; expect people to despise you for extending mercy and compassion and grace because you're his follower; expect people to despise you for exposing their self-serving ways, and casting light on dark places, for exposing abuse and suffering and injustice; expect people to denounce you for preaching prophetically and seeking justice and equity for all people; expect people to consider you an enemy and a threat for claiming your identity Child of the Most High and giving this claim your highest value. And when they hate you and despise you and consider you a threat because you're a Jesus follower, then go deep and love them all the more. Unbelievable. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? ...love your enemies, do good, and lend, and expect nothing in return” (Luke 6:32, 34).

Nothing in return. In Jesus' time, in the Greco-Roman world, reciprocity was the norm. This was the rule: I give so that you will give back to me. Tit for tat. *Quid pro quo*. As you can see in this text, Jesus' teaching questions this way of acting; it's extremely challenging and places extra demands on us because he expects us to go beyond mere reciprocity.⁵ He commands us to break, to cut, to stop the vicious cycle of reciprocity, of wanting to get even. The ethical standard is very high here. Jesus was going against the norm, going against the grain—then and expects the same from us today. Because that's what *God's* love always does. That's what God's love can do. It's not rational or reasonable, it's not natural; it's something else.

Like so much in Jesus' teaching, it comes down to love—understanding the risk and the cost of love, the difficulty and the joy of loving in this way. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), the Roman Catholic priest, theologian, and writer, reminds us, “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly.”

Jesus is always calling us toward mercy. Jesus is always calling us toward greater compassion (Lk. 6:36). He wants, he expects us to be people of mercy, people of compassion. But sometimes, often, it's just too much for us, we know the cost, we know what is required of us to love this way. And so, we need to be taught and guided by the Spirit, we need to be empowered to love more deeply, love more fiercely, love more courageously, until we discover that the one needing to be forgiven, the one who is our enemy, is also, at his or her core, worthy

of God's love, the object of God's love, the focus of God's love, just like you and me. For how can we, who have been forgiven by God, who know God's mercy and compassion, remain reluctant to extend that same mercy and grace that has already been extended to us— again and again and again and again?

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: 1900).

² Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, *Don't Forgive Too Soon: Extending the Two Hands That Heal* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 42.

³ Anne Lammott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Pantheon, 1999), 134.

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Forgive Assholes*, <https://www.makers.com/videos/5b0dd9e77cce6e349079ac04>

⁵ Timothy Luke Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 108-113.