

Expecting Nothing in Return

Luke 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany/ 20th February 2022

We know what Jesus asks of us. But we like to ignore these verses, conveniently forget about them or look the other way. It's a lovely idea, we think. Love your enemies. It's something we might wish to aspire toward. But then our realistic, or worse, our cynical voice breaks through and says, "But who can live this way?" Jesus, of course, but he was "perfect," we say; he was sinless, the Son of God, it's easy for him. Love our enemies? Forgive them? Are you serious? No way—not after what I've experienced, what I've seen, what's been done to me.

What do we do? Do we live by the commands that we like, the teachings that confirm our worldview, and set aside the more challenging ones? The English playwright, G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), famously wrote in 1900, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹

I get what Chesterton says about it being difficult and left untried. But Jesus didn't offer his disciples an ideal by which to live, that is, something aspired toward but never fully achieved. Jesus *expected* his disciples to live this way because he knew a disciple has the capacity to live this way with God's help. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you..." (Lk 6:27). He commands us to forgive those we hate (or who hate us).

And, yet, it's tough to hear these words. And it's tough to preach on this text. Forgiveness is complicated: theologically, psychologically, personally. It's a text that is prone to misunderstanding and abuse. We need to approach these verses with great care. Consider this verse alone: "Bless those who curse you," Jesus says, "pray for those who abuse you" (Lk. 6:28). To be told one must pray for one's abuser without working through the wrong that's been done would be cruel, unethical, and emotionally devastating. The abused or wronged may feel compelled to forgive because we're told it's the "Christian" thing to do. If forgiveness is not possible, not yet or maybe never, that generates guilt and feelings of inadequacy as a Christian.

All of this isn't easy. 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 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, 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. We wrestled with forgiveness several weeks ago in Thursday Morning Bible Study. The question of forgiveness always generates intense discussions.

A disciple of Jesus loves the enemy and offers forgiveness. But Jesus doesn't say how or when. 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 from wrong to forgiveness straight away. But this causes an enormous problem because forgiving can be a defense against facing strong emotions, such as anger. Instant forgiveness blocks us from honoring the hurt, recognizing the wrong that's been done, and acknowledging how we feel. Dissociating the wrong from the feelings associated with it is not good. Forgiving with the head and not the heart leads to division within the psyche.

Years ago, I came across a book with a great title, *Don't Forgive Too Soon*, written by Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn, therapists who are also faithful Christians. We often rush to forgiveness because we think it's the "Christian" thing to do and because we don't want to sit with our hurt. Sometimes we move too quickly through the forgiveness process and then 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 for 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 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

As a result, I am always cautious around this subject. I rarely tell a person they need to extend forgiveness. I have come to know from my own life, dealing with hurts and wounds 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 or wronged us. Eventually, there comes a time, like Joseph who forgave his brothers for the horrible things they did to him, (Gen. 45:3-11), when we need to let it go and be set free.

The maverick Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber is helpful here. "Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil," she says. "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 [passive] 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

speaking truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And *that's* worth fighting for."³

But love your enemies? Forgive them? Who is your enemy? Do you have enemies? Whom does Jesus have in mind? Just before 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. Jesus suggests that we will have people who dislike us, who are against us. And then, in the next verse, Jesus says we are to love the very ones who hate him and hate his followers. Jesus is talking about loving those who hate them *because* they are his followers. 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 as 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 his follower, then go deep and love them all the more because they, too, bear the image of God. "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 the Greco-Roman world, in Jesus' time, reciprocity was the norm. This was the rule: I give, not to be generous, only so that you will give back to me—*quid pro quo*. As you can see in this text, Jesus dismantles this way of living. He's incredibly challenging and places extra demands on us because he *expects* us to go beyond mere reciprocity.⁴ He commands us to break, cut, and stop the vicious cycle of reciprocity, of needing to get even. The ethical standard is very high here. Jesus was going against the norm—and expects the same from us today. And he says this not because he's setting up an unreachable ethical ideal but because he wants us to see that this is how *God* loves us, it's what God's love does to us and calls out from within us and allows us to give to the world. That's what God's love can do. Rowan Williams says it beautifully, "A willingness to forgive—and a willingness to be forgiven—are clearly the marks of a humanity touched by God," touched by the mercy of God.⁵ "Be merciful," Jesus said, "just as your Father is merciful" (Lk. 6:36).

Like so much in Jesus' teaching, it comes down to love and mercy. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), the Roman Catholic priest and theologian, reminds us, "Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly." Jesus is

merciful and is always calling us toward mercy. Jesus is compassionate and is always calling us toward greater compassion (Lk. 6:36). He wants, he expects, he *knows* we can be people of mercy, people of compassion when we stay close to him. Yes, the way of Christ is difficult. We know the cost; we know what is required to love this way. But we're not in this alone. The Spirit empowers you to love more deeply, love more fiercely, love more courageously, until you discover and see that the one needing to be forgiven, the one who is your enemy, is also, at their core, worthy of God's love, is the object of God's love just as much as you, is the focus of God's love, just as much as you. Forgiveness, expecting nothing in return, breaks the chain of reciprocity, restores our humanity and the humanity of the enemy, who also bears the image of God.⁶ 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?

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 Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Forgive Assholes | Have a Little Faith," *Makers*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhmRkUtPra8>.

⁴ Timothy Luke Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 108-113.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 41.

⁶ Williams, 40.