

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 23, 2025

Luke 6:27-38

The Rev. Sharon K. Sheffield

“Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Do not judge. Do not condemn. Forgive. Expect nothing in return.”

Wow. What a way to introduce, or re-introduce, myself to you as a preacher. Rather than something easy, something where I can gently play myself in, we are confronted with a difficult Gospel passage, filled with words from Jesus that are both important and hard. Words that are meant to astonish us, to shock us, to make us think and reevaluate life. And words that might make us want to tune out. As the Rev. Vaughn Crowe-Tipton has written, “Congregations often respond to this passage the same way kids respond to cooked spinach at dinner. No matter how much we explain the nutritional value, no one really wants to dig in.”¹ I would add to that – we don’t want to dig in because this text really isn’t easily digestible, no matter how it’s served. And it’s meant to be that way. Nevertheless, this is what Jesus is serving. So we need to do our best to “taste and see” what God is asking of us this morning, and see how this might fit in with the rest of the readings we’ve been hearing throughout the Epiphany season, which I like to call “the season of light.”

Let’s take a look at this morning’s Gospel reading, both in its Biblical context and in Jesus’ society. Luke makes it clear in the verses leading up to this morning’s reading that Jesus is addressing the disciples directly. So we can assume that this is part of an ongoing conversation with them; and more to the point, we can assume that this is something that he thinks they’re capable of handling. These words which ask them, and us, to go against societal norms (and possibly our biological programming for individual survival), to find fulfillment and joy in acting in a Godly manner rather than a worldly manner, are extraordinary in all senses of the word. I suspect that the disciples either laughed out loud or just stared at Jesus with gaping mouths when they heard what Jesus expected of them – because who wouldn’t? Who would think they could possibly live up to this Godly standard, asking us to live and love and serve others as God loves us and serves us? It looks at first glance like it’s a recipe for instant failure, because we are not God.

And these words are even more extraordinary when you remember what was happening in Israel at the time. These words were said to an occupied people, ones who were at the mercy of the Roman army and the Roman collaborators. Being struck on the cheek or worse... having your goods taken from you... fearing what the next day might bring... being beset by homeless beggars on a daily basis because homeless beggars are part of society in an authoritarian, occupied land... all of these were “just part of life” for the disciples and their friends and families. Reacting angrily toward the Romans could and often did mean torture or death, so most people just shut their lips and tried to get on with life. But the resentment was always there, simmering in the background. And Jesus is asking everyone to give that up. Not easily digestible, to be sure.

Yet our call is to do exactly that, or at least to spend our lives trying. And it's not because God is calling us to accept abuse willingly, or because God thinks that we all have a martyr complex. We need to be very careful when we work with these texts, because they have indeed been used throughout the centuries as justification for meekly accepting abuse, especially when it's a kind of abuse that society condones. That is not what Jesus is talking about; no one should have to live in an abusive situation, and God does not ask us to do so. Nor are we called to condone societal violence, violence from the haves towards the have-nots, violence towards those most in need of mercy by people who pretend to be following Christian values. We are always called by God to advocate for justice and mercy. What Jesus is doing is making a radical call to the kind of change of heart which leads to different behavior on both sides of the equation, to break the cycle of violence that has been part of history since before we started writing history down. And that can only be done by using different tools than the ones that may come naturally to us. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, hate won't stop hate. Only love can do that.

And living lives sourced in love toward all God's creation is incredibly hard, as we all know, either from studying history ourselves or from personal experience. Honestly forgiving and praying for those who have hurt us is hard, especially when you know that even if you feel forgiving today, you might not feel that way tomorrow... and you will have to start the process all over again. Honestly showing God's love to those who not only don't love us back, but actively despise us for who God created us to be, is hard. Not condemning and not judging are incredibly hard, because we do it every day, almost unconsciously. How many of us grumble at the people who drive like maniacs, who leave their trash strewn on the

sidewalk, who can't be bothered to park within the lines, who slack off and leave jobs for others to do? We all do. We make hundreds of little judgments every day. And those are the easy ones to try to modify, to try to train ourselves to react differently. It only gets bigger from there.

All this brings us right back to where our hearts and minds and souls are called to be, thinking about God's grace and God's love and how much we need them. The collect this morning reminds us that without love, whatever we do is worth nothing... and so we ask continually for God's greatest gift of love, for ourselves and for others. Like the rest of the world, we desperately need God's love. We need it for ourselves, and we need to accept it for ourselves and use it for others. We know we're always going to fall short, but that doesn't excuse us from trying. God loves us no matter whether we succeed or fail, and God gives us what we need to do a little better next time, if we will accept it.

The reward we get for trying to live this way is generally not full pews and full bank accounts. Indeed, sometimes it's the reverse. What we do receive is the transformation of ourselves and of this corner of the Kingdom that God asks us to tend. And that's one reason why we get these readings so close to Lent, at the end of the Season of Light. It's because in a couple of weeks, we get the chance to deliberately practice living a better life through our Lenten disciplines, in the hope that we'll move a few steps further along the path to living a life of authentic Christian love. Think of what Jesus is asking us to do, in our Gospel passages and in our Lenten journey, as spring training, for those of us who are baseball fans. We know from the start we're never going to be perfect. But the more we practice, and practice intentionally, the better we'll get. And we might just be ready when the one impossible play happens – when we suddenly leap off the ground and catch the fly ball that's soaring above our heads, because we've trained every day for just such a chance.

The call in Luke's gospel to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to do good to those who hurt us, is not just a good idea, to nod at and then set aside for business as usual. It's also not a call to grit our teeth and put on an act without really changing inside. Both of those options are spiritually deadly. It's a call to really live into what it means to be a beloved child of God and to see everyone else in the same light. If our actions are not grounded in our identity as siblings of Christ, Jesus' words to us this morning can indeed seem like an impossible list of demands that serve only to make us bitter and that do not, in fact, help the causes of God's justice and God's peace. But... when we understand

that our actions are meant to be sourced in and flow from God's abundant love towards us, then turning the other cheek, and going the extra mile, and forgiving, become acts of love. Because they are actions that resist evil in the name of love, and that have the power to transform us and to transform the world. And it's only possible with God's help and God's grace.

As we come to the end of the season after the Epiphany, with its emphasis on God's light spreading throughout the world, our readings remind us of how important light is for us and for others, and how important it is that we ourselves become light in the darkness for others. We need to hold on to that light as we prepare to head into the Lenten desert, and into the world outside these buildings, where "normal life" is changing almost faster than we can process, and where the way seems progressively harder and darker for so many. I encourage us all to use this next week and a half to really get ready for Lent and for the rest of our lives. In that way we may indeed find that putting our trust in the Lord leads to living in a better land than we have found before. We will find that taking delight in the Lord and the Lord's commands gives us what we truly desire, not what we think we want. We will find that when we are committed to God and God's ways, when we trust in God to do right for us and through us, that we receive in larger measure than we could ever imagine. May God grant us the grace to live in this way, so that we may be beacons of light and love, now and always.

Amen.

1 Vaughn Crowe-Tipton, Homiletical Perspective on Luke 6:27-38, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 381.