

## Listen and Love

If you were with us last week, you may remember my observation that Christians tend to interpret Jesus's words as commands to do things we'd really rather not. In this Gospel passage, Jesus appears to do exactly that, and it's hard to accept. "Seriously, Jesus, you expect me to love my enemies? Do good to those who hate me? Pray for my abusers? Give whatever I have to anyone who takes from me? Come on, Lord, be reasonable!" To borrow a favorite phrase from Jesus, truly I tell you, I was sorely tempted to preach on the psalm today. But in a season where so many of our relationships are stressed to the breaking point by anger and outrage, Jesus's words ring with special relevance. So, let's dig in and see what we find.

This Gospel passage is the second segment of the Sermon on the Plain, a sermon that might or might not be Luke's take on the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. Interestingly, while Luke's blessings and woes are simpler and shorter than Matthew's Beatitudes, this passage is more complex than Matthew's comparable chapter. That reinforces my sense that the Sermon on the Plain might well be a different sermon than the Sermon on the Mount, delivered by Jesus in a different setting at a different time in his ministry. What matters most about this passage, though, is not its context, but its content. Having promised that those who have suffered will be rewarded, Jesus explains in just a few short sentences how his followers should engage with troublesome people if we want to join him in the Kingdom of God.

In his commentary on this passage, Dr. Ronald J. Allen offers some historical background for Jesus's remarks. In the Hellenistic world, relationships were widely understood to be reciprocal. "A person behaved generously towards another person in the expectation that in the future, the generosity would be returned," Allen writes. However, "in the ancient world, many groups [also] believed that the community was to imitate its leader." When Jesus called for his

followers to put aside earthly notions of reciprocity and, instead, be merciful as God is merciful, he and Luke could reasonably expect them to follow his example as best they could.

The idea of extending mercy to those who deserve punishment would not have been entirely foreign to Jesus's audience. The Hebrew Scriptures present several stories of good people choosing mercy when they would have been justified in seeking vengeance. But there's no better example than Joseph, he of "the amazing technicolor dream coat," who greets his brothers with such generosity in our passage from Genesis. To summarize his story, Joseph was the favorite son of Abraham's grandson, Jacob. He was also a prophetic dreamer. His brothers got so fed up with Joseph's predictions that he would someday rule over them that they sold him into slavery in Egypt and told Jacob that he was dead. Joseph's prophetic talents proved so valuable that Pharaoh freed Joseph and made him Governor of Egypt, second in rank only to Pharaoh himself. When famine struck, Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt as refugees, desperately seeking food. Recognizing them, Joseph could have had his brothers imprisoned or executed for what they had done to him. He did toy with them a bit, but then he forgave them, embraced them, and promised to provide for them. Joseph's brothers weren't entirely off the hook. They still had to return to Jacob and confess what they'd done to him and his favorite son. That can't have been a comfortable conversation, but it led to lasting reconciliation among Jacob's sons who, in turn, fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. That's Kingdom mercy at work.

Researching this sermon, I was disheartened to see some Bible scholars wonder if Jesus's words are realistic in our modern, violent world. For example, in 2022, Father Michael J. Marsh poignantly asked in "Living Large – A Sermon on Luke 6:27-38," "I wonder if this gospel even makes sense in today's world of enemies, haters, cursers, and abusers. I'm not saying we don't

need today's gospel, we need it more than ever. But, is it really possible to live like that?" It's a good question that has gained relevance in the three years since Father Marsh asked it.

To answer, we must first recognize that Jesus's words are not a command. He's speaking to "you that listen." It might break his heart, but we're free to reject or ignore Jesus's teachings. As Dr. Allen observes, Jesus "does not offer a comprehensive list of ethical maxims for the community but mentions several ... representative examples of mercy in action ... Listeners can then reason their way into how to put the values of the [Kingdom] ... into practice [in] other situations." We may decide that judgment and condemnation are sometimes the proper response to others' bad behavior. We can allow abusers to suffer the legal and societal consequences of their actions, and remove ourselves from abusive situations. But withholding forgiveness comes at a cost beyond the possibility of facing divine condemnation. Refusing to be merciful, we lose the benefits that mercy might provide not only to our so-called enemies but to our own souls.

As Dr. Allen writes, "[t]o be unforgiven and unforgiving is to be imprisoned by the lack of forgiveness." Judgment and condemnation feed self-righteous indignation, which feels wonderful at first but curdles into poison over time. Without breaching any confidence, I've seen firsthand how holding grudges can cripple a soul. When anger becomes the centerpiece of someone's life, no matter how justified, healing becomes impossible, and the opportunity to start afresh is lost. Choosing to be merciful and forgive frees us from the oppressive burden of resentment and lets us move forward into an unencumbered, peaceful life. Ultimately, mercy brings greater blessings to the one who forgives than to the one who receives forgiveness.

If you find it emotionally difficult to forgive, consider this. When Jesus speaks about loving your enemies, he's not talking about *feelings*. He's talking about actions. Jesus doesn't require his followers to harbor warm feelings for people who've wronged us. We don't even have

to like them. But Jesus *does* ask us to break the vindictive cycle of “an eye for an eye,” to treat others well even after they’ve wronged us, and to remember that vengeance belongs to God alone. Abusers may not always seem to get what they deserve, at least not in this world. Still, even when those who have hurt us seem to prosper, we can take comfort in knowing that we went high when every instinct told us to go low. When we go high, we can reach up and draw the Kingdom of God that much closer to our broken, hurting world.

If that isn’t enough incentive to follow Jesus’s teachings, remember that we can also delight in their subversive power of resistance. As the Reverend Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore pointed out in her commentary on this passage, “[w]hen we live the ethic of this Sermon in the face of this world’s violence, we are collectively saying to those who hate, abuse, strike, judge, and condemn, ‘You are not the boss of me.’ We are demonstrating that bad behavior cannot goad us into reacting in kind. We are resisting the evils we deplore.” Whatever is done to and around us, we can reject violence and hate, and there’s nothing the haters can do to stop us.

Attitude matters. King Solomon wrote in the Book of Proverbs, “[i]f your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.” I’m not sure that Jesus would have approved of Solomon’s motives. But I *am* sure that meeting anger with anger, violence with violence, and hatred with hatred does nothing to bring the Kingdom of God any closer to our broken world. Our Lord asks a lot from us, but no more than he asks of himself. Jesus assures us that our God is kind, showing mercy even to the ungrateful and the wicked. In what Father Marsh calls “today’s world of enemies, haters, cursers, and abusers,” we can choose to follow Jesus whether others do or not. We can choose to listen to his teachings. We can choose to love. And even if we can’t always do it perfectly, by God’s grace, what we do will be enough. Amen.