

Sermon based on St. Luke 6:27-38

Be Merciful, Just As Your Father is Merciful

There may never have been more shocking words spoken on this earth. In our Gospel, Jesus told us to love—not love our friends, not our fellow church members, not even those who are nice; he said to love our enemies. Do good to those who hate us. He tells us to respond to evil with good. In other words, our religious leader, our God, is telling us to treat people the opposite of how they deserve to be treated.

This is not only contrary to what we might think; it is the opposite of what our world thinks. How could you get ahead if you do good to your enemies? How could you even survive in this vicious world? It doesn't make sense—until we stop and remember what the Lord God has done, what he has done for us. He takes care of our physical needs, and our spiritual needs. We by nature are God's enemies; yet God loves us—he loved us enough to die to pay for our wrongs.

Jesus brings our attention where it needs to fall when he says, Be Merciful, Just As Your Father is Merciful. Let's stop and dwell on God's love, as we consider how we can love.

Our Gospel follows right after last week's, where Jesus said that those who are poor in spirit, those who hunger, those who are persecuted are in fact blessed—blessed by God now and blessed forever with heaven. Now Jesus tells us what that means for how we lead our lives: **“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.”**

As I said, these words go against everything our world says. And not just in the 21st century. Back in Jesus' day, the Jewish people, who had God's law which said to love others, even those Jews refused to love their enemies. The Jewish teachers taught that you should love your family, and be kind to your fellow Jews; love your neighbor, but they said, hate your enemies.

Do you remember when one of those teachers tried to test Jesus? He mentioned God's command to “love your neighbor,” and he asked, **“who is my neighbor?”** And Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan—a non-Jew. Samaritans were considered enemies of Jews, yet that Samaritan man stopped and helped a Jewish man who'd been beaten. He helped even though a Jewish priest had walked past the poor man. That Samaritan loved his enemy. This is what it means to “love your neighbor.” But the people of Jesus' day did not think like that.

People don't think that way today, either. In fact, many would say that if you love your enemy, if you turn the other cheek, if you let someone take your coat, you are a loser. Many books have been written pushing the idea that you should do whatever it takes to beat everyone else. If you want to be a success, you can't let anyone take advantage of you.

How could Jesus say what he said? Because what he was telling us to do is exactly what our God does.

God loves his enemies. He loves the false prophet who misleads others; he loves the adulterer, and the gossip, and all who break his commands. He loves you and me. For we are God's enemies. We break his commands every day. You don't have to write a book about it; you know just how selfish you are in dealing with others.

Yet God loves us. God does good to those who hate him, he blesses those who curse him. First off, God makes the sun shine on the good and the bad, he causes rain to fall around the world. He provides food and shelter to people, though we continue to disobey him.

But of course there is so much more that God does for us. Jesus is God himself, as he demonstrated with his miracles, using his power to heal people with the worst illnesses. Yet when he was doing these acts of love, many people rejected him. They felt threatened by his love. They attacked him. And how did he respond? He turned the other cheek; he didn't strike out at them, instead he went about his business of loving others.

And when the people cursed him, accusing him of being evil, when they lied about him and conspired against him, he let them not only strike his cheek, but arrest him and beat him and mock him and finally put him to death.

But Jesus was no loser. Death could not hold him. He came back to life, and was seen alive for 40 days before ascending to his throne in heaven.

And because Jesus was willing to do all this—because he sacrificed himself for those who hated him, because he loved us, his enemies, with an endless love, we are saved. We won't be punished for all the times we've been selfish. Heaven is our home.

Now we can love like God loves us. We are Christians, and we can live as little Christs to the world around us. Let's look again at Jesus' words that describe how we live.

Jesus is speaking about how to deal with enemies. James Thurber was a famous humor writer. He told a story about his grandfather, who had been a pioneer out West, which included getting into plenty of brawls. On his deathbed, he was asked by a minister, "Have you forgiven all your enemies?" "Haven't got any," the old man said. The pastor didn't couldn't believe this. "How would a two-fisted battler like you go through life without enemies?" And grandpa replied, "I shot 'em."

Sometimes that may be what we'd like to do with our enemies. But Jesus said, "**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.**" Notice, Jesus did not say, "Do not have enemies." He assumes that you will have enemies. In fact, elsewhere Jesus said that if you live a Christian life, some people will hate you.

What we are to do with enemies is love them. "Love" does not mean we have to have warm, fuzzy feelings for them; you probably won't. Paul talked about love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. "**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy... It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.**" Love means we look out for the best interests of the other person. Jesus says that's what we should do even for our enemies.

"**Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.**" In our First Reading today Joseph certainly could have been angry at his brothers. They had sold him into slavery, then lied and said he'd died. Years later, Joseph was the second most powerful man in Egypt; and when his brothers came to try to buy food, he could have punished them. But he loved them.

Once he recognized that they were sorry for what they'd done, he forgave them. Joseph knew that God was with him all those years, and that's why he didn't need to harbor a grudge.

“If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also.” Now, we have to remember, Jesus isn't talking about someone who is threatening your life. You do have the right to defend yourself; in fact, God wants us to preserve life. Jesus is talking about someone who slaps you. It may sting, your pride may be hurt, but it's not going to kill you. We'd be tempted to get back at the person. But as we heard in our Second Reading, **“Do not take revenge....but leave room for God's wrath.”** If the person is to be punished, God will take care of that. By showing love to the person, we can give a fine witness to God, who loves each of us.

“If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.” We sometimes say someone would “give you the shirt off his back.” Jesus is saying that we don't need to try to get back everything we can from others. After all, if someone takes something from me, who is the one who's in trouble? That person is in deep trouble with the Lord, if he doesn't repent of his sin. But I can be confident that the Almighty Lord will see that all my needs are met, even if someone steals from me. So Jesus can even say, **“Give to anyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.”**

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” This is called the “Golden Rule.” Many religions say you should follow it. But only Jesus applies it to people who have harmed you, people you'd consider to be your enemy. Treat them as you'd like to be treated, with love.

Jesus then drove his point home: **“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them.”** If you only love those who are good to you, that's not love. That's payback.

The love of God extends to those who are not so lovable. God loved us; so we can love others. **“Then...you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”**

Jesus added one more point: **“Then your reward will be great.”** He's not talking about salvation—that's not a reward for anything you do; your salvation is a result of what he did. The reward you get from loving others is to live as a child of God. Loving others helps you avoid the hate and live in peace.

In July 2015 a young white man went into a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine people. The people who survived, and the relatives of those killed, certainly had reason to hate that man. All the more so when afterwards he said it was a good thing he'd done, to kill black people. Yet a survivor of that attack spoke for many when she said that, two days after the killing, she forgave the man. She said, “Hate destroys those who harbor it. I refuse to let hate destroy me.”

When we love our enemies, we let go of the hate that would fill our hearts. Maybe you've felt the weight of a grudge—it can make you physically sick. As we love others, there is a reward for us: the reward of knowing God's peace in our hearts. And as we forgive others, we are reminded of the forgiveness that we have, for all our sins, because of Christ.

Many people don't understand this. They say that we Christians are weak; that we're losers; they might even say that we're letting evil win. The truth is that when we love our enemies and forgive those who have sinned, we are conquering evil. When we love, we are doing just what our God did to this evil world. God loved the world—and in his love he gave his

one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. And God wants all people to be saved.

May we love as God loves us. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Amen.