

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Loving Enemies

Luke 6

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This morning's gospel reading brings us face to face with ourselves. Somewhere along the way, coming or going, we find ourselves confronted by ourselves, somewhere. Somewhere in the passage:

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who mistreat you.

Is Jesus really serious about all of this? He who was nailed to the cross surely grasped the significance of this, right? And surely, he grasped the problems inherent to this way of talking about this way of being in the world. For starters, he just assumes all his hearers have enemies, which for 1st century Jews living under Roman occupation, I suppose they could easily point them out. But does everyone, all the time? It might turn into a self-fulfilling prophesy--

We certainly have interlocutors, we have competitors, we have interrupters, we have opponents or rivals, people who hurt us. Are any of these the same as enemies? The guy coasting in the left lane on the highway on his phone. The lady in the checkout line paying with a check. The co-worker who eats your lunch from the fridge. Vanquish them all, I say!

But then I remember, sometimes, we show up on the other side of the good-evil ledger. A couple of years ago, I threw into the trash can an old Styrofoam container from the office mini fridge only to learn later that morning in very clear and direct terms that it was not an old Styrofoam container of old, rotten food. It was our youth minister's lunch, prized, cultivated leftovers from Bangkok Royale the night before. Kingsley was excited about it as one should be when the meal only gets better overnight. When she saw her precious in the trash, I was in trouble. I ended up having to buy her double the lunch from Bangkok that day just to be sure she got what would possibly make up for this egregious violation in the lunch contract of the mini fridge. I'm not totally sure she's forgiven me for it yet, so I figured on this day, I'd confess to you all. Mostly so there are witnesses if I show up missing. You know who to interrogate first.

If we're going to ask if Jesus is serious about this, I suppose we should be serious in listening to it. We can make a distinction between actions from others that are annoyances—like the left lane driver—and actions and people that are much more serious—wounds that cut deep, anger that wells up, resentment that builds up over years. Almost all of us are aware of situations and relationships where there's been a rift, or where unresolved conflicts cause harm. There's plenty in scripture about what you are to

do when you're the one who causes the harm, when you're the one who sins; this teaching is directed to the one who is suffering at the hand of another. There's spiritual work to be done on this side of the ledge, too.

We're also acutely aware that the actions of people you'll never meet get very personal. How do *you* deal with what *you* feel at what you see and hear on the news about the state, the nation, other nations, or the planet? Anger, perhaps? Rage? Despair? Hatred? If you feel any of those things, you're not alone. We seem to be a nation captive to the political-industrial rage machine. I believe there's a righteous version to those responses. The prophets wielded it. Jesus flipped tables. Righteous anger is an appropriate and useful response to the injustices of the powerful preying on the weak. It can motivate action, often self-sacrificial on behalf of others or even help gin up the courage to stand up for yourself when you need to.

Yet, even there, there is spiritual work to be done in all of this. It's the spiritual work that may repair relationships; it's the spiritual work that bears witness to the way of Jesus as powerfully as anything else; it's the spiritual work that will save your life from becoming small and angry and resentful.

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

No where does Jesus whitewash the experience of being hated, cursed, or abused. He doesn't say it's all in your head, or you're to blame for what's happened, or stop being so weak and get over it. He also doesn't say you have to keep putting yourself in the path of your enemy if you can help it. But it is quite remarkable that Jesus goes right to the heart of one of the hardest experiences in life and there, lays out a redemptive path. It is the way of Jesus.

No where that I'm aware of in scripture, or maybe all of literature or history, this side of the cross, is this way illustrated more fully than the story of Joseph and his brothers. His brothers, his family. They took everything from him—and they were his family. They resented him and how their father seemed to dote on him and favor him. And to be fair, Joseph wasn't the easiest brother to have. Sometimes the people closest to you are the most challenging. But aren't we all from time to time? His brothers got him alone, they ripped his special coat from him—the one his father gave him, and they threw him down into a pit while they stood above him and debated whether to just kill him. Joseph is like, "I'm right here. I can hear you." Instead of just murdering him, they saw an opportunity to profit from his demise, so they sold him to a caravan of traders—sold him away from home into slavery. So here's Joseph, gone out minding his business to check on his brothers, and by the end of the day—they've turned on him, beaten him, weighed whether to murder him, and now he's in chains being driven away, away from everything—the life he's ever known—by his own brothers. If you've ever felt rejected, or misunderstood, or stolen from,

or threatened, or mistreated, or like something or everything you have, even your own dignity is taken from you, and you're powerless to stop it, you have a connection to Joseph's story.

Why is this story—and all its awful details-- in the Bible? I suppose to let any of us know you're not alone. And to see how he reacted and what can happen even in the worst, hard times. There's no rescue here for Joseph. He suffers from what they did. The brothers go back home to make up a story to Dad about what happened to him. "Uh Dad, really sorry, but he was killed by a wild animal. Here's his coat covered in blood." When people hurt you and then lie about it, that's about as bad as it gets. But it got worse for Joseph. He was sold into slavery into Egypt where he was assigned to serve a wealthy family. Then accused, falsely, of malfeasance, he was thrown in to prison. From favored son to wrongly convicted criminal languishing in a dungeon in a foreign land.

The turnaround from there is the stuff of Shakespearian theater or Greek drama or biblical epic of grace. He gets out of prison, goes to work for Pharaoh, rises to 2nd in command, demonstrates uncommon wisdom, and institutes a series of actions that help the nation prepare for a coming famine. The famine comes to the whole world as they knew it. And then one day, deep into it, suffering from hunger, having heard there was food in Egypt, through the office door of Joseph comes... his brothers asking for help. They don't recognize him, but he knows it's them.

What would you do?

The whole story is so preposterous as compared to our little lives and our problems and our conflicts. But is it? It's a fundamentally human story—what do you do when you can delight in and cause suffering in one who has caused you suffering? It's the moment you daydream about—getting back at them; making them feel what you've felt. What would you do? is the question. But maybe the question for each of us is: what do you do? What are you doing now with those feelings? The path toward enemy-love isn't to mollify the angry or the hurting; it is the path to finding life in the spiritual geography that kills your soul.

Loving your enemy seems like a very tall ask. In the Bible, love is not a word you mess around with. It's not just a feeling; it's not a passing thought. *Agape* love is a whole-served commitment to the well-being of another; *agape* love is selfless and patient and kind. It doesn't keep a record of wrong; it rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That seems like a very tall ask. And it is. And any of us may not be at all ready or able to give such love like this, but there's something we can do. And are told we must do.

I think there is an order of operations here before us. If loving your enemies is too much right now, then start by doing good to those who hate you. Do something good. Anything you can.

But if doing any good to the one who hates you is too much right now, then start by blessing the one who curses you. Any blessing.

But if blessing the one who curses you is too much right now, then start by praying for the one who abuses you. Every prayer is a hope for their redemption and salvation and transformation. We can possibly do that, at least.

But if even that's too much right now, then pray for the mercy of God to come to you to be able to pray for those who cause you hurt. And that's the bedrock. That we *must* do—to pray for the mercy of God to come into our lives. This is the way, and there is no other way in Jesus.

“Just as we have borne the image of the one of dust,” so Paul says, “we also bear the image of the one of heaven.” For Joseph, it had been years anyway since “The Incident” that tore his life apart. But then the moment came. He sent everyone else out of the room. Looked at his brothers in the eyes, and said, “It’s me. It’s your brother Joseph.” They didn’t believe him. They couldn’t believe their eyes. It was like he’d come back from the dead, and he might as well have. And they were afraid—they’d for all purposes had killed him. But he assured them: “Right now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here.” He doesn’t whitewash the past or what they did. But he’s ready to bless them, to do good for them, to love them. The change in him--and it must have been a change in his spirit toward them--came because of his desire to reconcile with his loved ones and because he’s seen now what God has done. God sent me before you to preserve life. I can help you. I can make something good out of this terrible thing.

God can make something good out of hard things... and painful things... and frustrating things... and disabling things... and disempowering things... God can make good out of terrible things. Out of a brother sold to slavery—God is using this to make a future; out of the cross of Christ—Father, forgive them; they know not what they do; out of our suffering—God uses it to teach us the meaning of love

What is love if love is only for people who love you back all the time? That’s not love, not yet. Love is what happens in you when there’s no transactional reason for it. It’s God’s love coming alive in you. And God’s love for you and in you will save your life.

So Let us pray for God’s mercy for ourselves, for others. As we come to the table, we bring to the altar of God our own need for forgiveness, and we bring our need to forgive. In God’s mercy---in God’s wide mercy, let it all be redeemed in Christ’s abundant grace working in and through you for this day and all the days to come.