

*A Different Direction*  
A Sermon on Luke 6:27-38 by the Rev. Philip Major  
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ February 23, 2025

If you find yourself challenged when Jesus says, "Love your enemies" it means you are paying attention. Yet in these instructions, so challenging for us to follow, we find the Good News. We find the life that is so vibrant and strong and powerful we call it 'eternal life'. Let's take a broader and deeper look at Luke's Gospel, in order to hear this Good News.

Let's notice that today's passage is from a larger section of Luke's Gospel called *The Sermon on the Plain*. *The Sermon on the Plain* is Luke's version of a sermon Jesus preached to a large crowd of people near the beginning of his ministry. You might be more familiar with Matthew's version of the sermon; it's called *The Sermon on the Mount*.

It might be helpful to compare Luke's Gospel and Matthew's Gospel for a moment. Matthew's Gospel came into its written form about fifty years after Jesus' time. Luke's Gospel was written later, perhaps sixty or seventy years after Jesus' time. It's interesting that Matthew and Luke include many verses that are nearly identical, and that these shared verses are not found in Mark and John. This leads a lot of people who study the Bible to conclude that the authors of Matthew and Luke had copies of the same written collection of sayings of Jesus, as each of them were writing their versions of the Gospel story of Jesus. Today's passage includes material that comes from that ancient source. This ancient source of sayings of Jesus was probably written just 10 or 15 years after Jesus' time.

This is important for me, because it means we can be sure Jesus said the words we read a few minutes ago. And it's important to be sure Jesus said the things in our Gospel passage because they are so very challenging. As followers of Jesus, we cannot make excuses for ourselves or others, and say this passage is not relevant for us. So let's dig a little deeper.

Let's remember that Jesus was not the first person to say these ideas about loving your enemies, or helping people who are unable to help you. As with almost everything Jesus says, these ideas are found in several places in the Hebrew scriptures. In Leviticus chapter nineteen we read these verses: *the immigrants and refugees who reside with you shall be to you as citizens; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt*. In Proverbs chapters twenty-four and twenty-five we read: *Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble. If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat*. Jesus is preaching on themes that are deeply rooted in his Jewish tradition.

Let's also notice that the passage we are reading today is the middle part of *The Sermon on the Plain*. We heard the first part last week. You might remember these verses from last week: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort*. The message of today's passage is built on these verses, which we call "The Beatitudes".

The Beatitudes are all about rich and poor people. This section is sometimes perplexing for you and me, because we wonder if we would be considered part of the poor people or part of the rich people in the passage. It worked the same way for Jesus' first disciples.

During the time when they lived many people were poor. About half of the people in Judah were poor. To be poor meant not knowing if you would have enough food to feed your family this week. A very small number of people were rich. To be rich meant you didn't actually do much work. In Jesus' time, rich people could always hire other people to do all of the work for them. So the first part of *The Sermon on the Plain* was perplexing for Jesus' disciples, just like it is for many of us, because they were not really poor, and they were certainly not rich. Jesus' disciples worked six days a week, but several of them had enough money to own their own fishing boats, and one of them was a tax collector, and tax collectors were definitely not poor.

In the story of the rich and the poor told in the Beatitudes Jesus is telling his disciples there are two distinct directions to take in your life, and you have to make a choice. Will you side with the poor or will you follow the way of the rich? We have to make a choice between following the way of the rich, which is the way of selfishness and greed, or taking the side of the poor.

Over and over again, you and I find we have to make a choice about our primary direction in life, and our choice determines whether or not we are following Jesus. This theme continues through the middle part of the sermon, which we just read a few minutes ago. Let's take a few minutes to look at these verses in detail.

*Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."* This verse is about the way we respond to the insults and bad things that happen to us. We have two options for how we respond to bad things that happen to us. Our first impulse is to respond with vengeance, by inflicting similar hurtful actions against their enemies. Jesus tells us to go in a different direction, which is to act with respect, and even to provide support to, our enemies.

This is one of those fundamental decisions for us as disciples, not unlike the decision about whether we are going to side with the poor or follow the way of the rich. When bad things happen to us we have two paths, two directions to consider. We know the first path very well. It's the path of revenge. We follow Jesus when we take the second, and more difficult path, which is to seek to understand and take care of our enemies.

There are times when I feel this is almost impossible. I can still try to head in the right direction. God empowers us to take that first step, which is to not lash out in vengeance. God empowers us to take the second step, which is to try to understand our enemies. This direction of not cultivating vengeance in our lives, of trying to understand our enemies, is the path of abundant life. It's the path Jesus calls 'eternal life'.

The next verse says, *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.* Jesus is not telling us we should submit ourselves to physical abuse and violence. This verse is definitely not condoning a strong person assaulting a weaker person. This verse is about a particular form of insult that was a feature of Jesus' time and place. When two people of equal status were engaged in an argument, it was common for the two people to be standing, facing one another. In many cases the argument would be between people who were not strangers, but knew each other well. If the argument escalated, it was not uncommon for one person to slap the other in the face, as a physical symbol of making an insult. This is not about people who are engaged in a physical conflict.

Jesus is not telling us to submit to being physically assaulted by someone on the street. Jesus is telling us to not retaliate when we have been insulted. As disciples, one of our tasks is to break the cycle of violence. Breaking the cycle of violence is part of Jesus' way, which is the way of 'eternal life'.

The second paragraph of the passage is important, and it's all getting at a single point. *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.* This verse and the verses that follow are illustrating the two paths Jesus is describing in yet one more way. The easy path is to seek reciprocity in all our dealings. It's to say, "I will do this for you, only if you give me something in return." Jesus tells us to give to others, expecting nothing in return, which is the way of abundant life.

This should be familiar to members of St. Paul's. When we donate food to *The Open Pantry*, we give food to people who will never be able to pay us back. This past week a group of our members walked down the street to the YMCA Senior Apartments and threw a little party for the seniors who live there, never expecting anything in return.

God is our inspiration for this. God gives generously to us, not asking anything in return. God has given you many gifts and resources. God has given you the greatest gift of all, which is the ability to love another person. God has given us these gifts, not because we have earned them, or somehow

deserve them, but because God loves us. God expects nothing in return for the gifts we have been given. God knows many times we will fail. This is the meaning of love: giving something to someone, even though we know they will fail, or will be unable, to reciprocate.

Every time we gather for worship, and especially every time we celebrate communion, we give thanks for God's love for us. At the climax of the Eucharistic Prayer, when the bread is broken and we stand in silence, we remember and experience God's generosity. We remember God has suffered, as we have suffered. God loves us so much, God was willing to be broken, because you and I are broken.

This is why we have gathered here today. We gather to remember and be strengthened by the love of God, given to us without expectations. We gather together because we have to choose the direction we're going to take in life. It's a choice between compassion and revenge, a choice between love and selfishness, a choice between joy and grief. We gather together because we cannot follow Jesus on our own, but only in a community dedicated to following the way of Christ. We gather together to support and to be supported, to encourage and to be encouraged in following the way that fills our lives with strength, with peace, with joy.