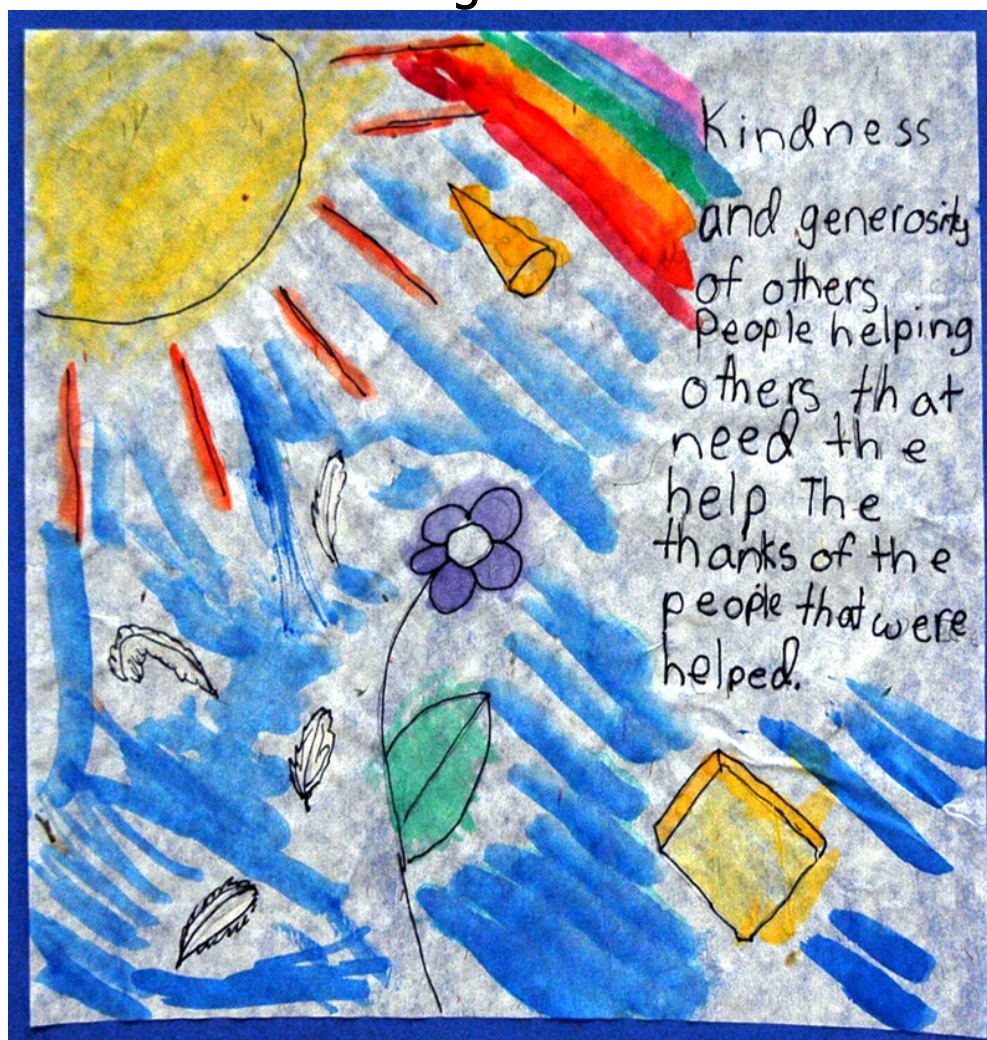


Loving Enemies



Luke 6:27-38

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So, what's Jesus saying here? Why would our Savior, the one we are called to follow, tell us to love those who oppose us, hurt us, reject us, shame us? How can we open our hearts or forgive those who have been nothing but cold and cruel? Turn the other cheek? Really? To those people? Ha! Surrender, offer ourselves for more abuse, lay down in front of a train, be a punching bag, a wet noodle? Fagedaboutit! Jesus sets too high a bar! It certainly sounds foolish from our vantage point, but it truly is a different way of being, challenging us to live our values fully.

One example of this comes from the stories of the Desert Fathers. A solitary monk lived in a hut out in the desert. Once when he was away worshipping in with others in the community, he returned to his hut to find that thieves had broken in and taken all

of his belonging. He noticed that they had neglected to take an old bowl that he ate from, and so he grabbed it and ran after them shouting, "Friends, you missed this bowl! Please take it!" Sounds crazy, right? How do we understand this?

It is best to start with what Jesus and his followers were experiencing in his time. Their society was dominated by the Roman Empire, with its vast armies and brutal oppression that utilized extreme torture, slavery, and mass crucifixions to control its conquered populations. They were not about to brook any upstarts or rebellions. So how to survive and stay human in that system? Jesus' method was not to use sword against sword, or to bend the knee and knuckle under. His middle way, shared by the early church, was to create an alternative way of life, an opposite world, that pushed back against the inhumane and unjust systems that surrounded them. They created a community of like-minded souls who practiced equality, compassion, sharing, and non-violent resistance.

For example, Roman soldiers were allowed to slap anyone who annoyed them. Jesus' approach was that after a back-handed slap; turn the other cheek so that a soldier had to look you in the eye, face-to-face, before slapping you again. That took courage, standing up. Another example: Roman soldiers were allowed to order anyone to carry their packs for a mile. So, Jesus taught that at the end of the mile offer to carry the pack another mile. This pushes them off-balance, and makes them see you as a person, not a pack horse, with the freedom to decide for yourself. Show your independence, your clout, even if it seems a bit crazy! Jesus taught freedom from the inner shackles of domination and control, an alternative way of approaching power, moving away from cycles of vengeance, to transformation through love. Mahatma Gandhi realized this when he said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

I want to share with you the words of Detective Stephen McDonald, a NYC policeman. His nephew used to volunteer at my church in Holmdel, and one day he told us he had to leave suddenly to attend his uncle's funeral that was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral surrounded by a sea of blue uniforms. These are the words of Detective McDonald:

I am a New York City Police Officer. On July 12, 1986, I was on patrol in Central Park and stopped to question three teenagers. While I was questioning them, the oldest, a fifteen-year-old, took out a gun and shot me in the head and neck. Thanks to the quick action of my fellow police officers, I was rushed to a hospital. A few days later, once it became clear I was going to survive, a surgeon came into my room and told my wife, Patti Ann, and me that I would be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of my life. He told my wife I would need to be institutionalized. I was married just eight months, and my wife, twenty-three years old, was three months pregnant. Patti Ann was

crying uncontrollably at the cards she had been dealt, and I cried too. I was locked in my body, unable to move or to reach out to her.

Our faith suddenly became very important to us: the Catholic mass, prayers, our need for God. It was God's love that put me back together. And it came from many different corners. Christians of every orientation, Jews, Muslims, and people of no faith at all were rooting for me.

A week after I was shot, the media asked to speak to my wife. Though still in shock, Patti Ann bravely told everybody that she would trust God to do what was best for her family. That set the tone not only for my recovery but also for the rest of our lives. When things like this happen, people sometimes distance themselves from God. Patti Ann taught me that you don't do that. You trust God. She trusted, and here I am.

I spent the next eighteen months in the hospital. While I was there my wife gave birth to our son, Conor. At his baptism I told everyone I forgave the young teen who shot me. I wanted to free myself of all the negative, destructive emotions that this act of violence awoke in me – the anger, the bitterness, the hatred. I needed to free myself of those so I could be free to love my wife and our child and those around us.

I often tell people that the only thing worse than a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart. Such an attitude would have extended my tragic injury into my soul, hurting my wife, son, and others even more. It is bad enough that the physical effects are permanent, but at least I can choose to prevent spiritual injury.

A year or two later, Shavod Jones, the young man who shot me, called my home from prison and apologized to my wife, my son, and me. I told him that I hoped he and I could work together sometime in the future. I hoped that we would travel around the country together to share our different understandings of that act of violence that changed both our lives, and the understanding it gave us about what is most important in life. In 1995, Shavod was released from prison. Three days later, he died in a motorcycle accident. But Shavod Jones is with me wherever my story is told. We have helped many people, the two of us.

This is a story of real courage and the value of faith.

In order to love our enemies – we need to first let go – empty ourselves – allow the hurt to wash away – to release the hatred, negativity and rage that eat away at our souls. As Detective Stephen McDonald said: *"I often tell people that the only thing worse than a bullet in my spine would have been to nurture revenge in my heart."* This is about letting go of the poison of resentment and fury. This release is an opening of the heart. It allows us to be human, alive again, and ready to welcome life. This is why so many admired this man.

This is how God calls us to live, open to God's presence, open to what life brings us, open to the wonders and beauty of this glorious existence, even if it is from a wheelchair. We live in a time of mistrust of strangers and fear of enemies with finger-pointing, scapegoating, and labeling of friends and foes: right or left, foreigners, refugees, immigrants, brown or white, the disabled, the LGBTQ community and others. As followers of Jesus it would be wise of us to step back, to take a deep breath, and then to look those we fear in the eyes. We don't have to retaliate and hurt back. Forgiveness is a doorway back into this world. Like prayer, like meditation, like calm awareness, it allows our eyes to clear so that we can see things as they are – in their truth and simplicity.

I'm not saying that we should just become doormats or punching bags to evil people. No. We need to protect ourselves and be smart. Jesus says that we need to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves,' meaning we need to know when to be open and when to protect ourselves. But what Jesus does say is that we need to be ready to be 'innocent as doves'. Otherwise we're serpents all the time. We can conquer through a third way: not just fight or surrender – but by engaging our enemies, seeking to transform them through love and forgiveness into whole persons.

Jesus teaches resistance through love. But too often in our day – all we hear about is hatred, defensiveness, anger and cynicism. His disciples asked him how often they should be willing to forgive someone – up to seven times? No, Jesus replies, seven times seventy times. Forgive continuously – strive to be open. Then we can create communities of understanding and mutual respect.

That's a very tall order. Loving does not mean just the ones we feel close to, whom we like and trust. It also means the suspect, the stranger, the other, the upsetting, the different, and those we don't quite trust. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, former head rabbi for Great Britain, said that the Hebrew Bible only uses the words "love your neighbor as yourself" one time in Leviticus. Jesus quotes this as the essence of the law. But Rabbi Sachs says that the words "love the stranger" are found 36 times in the Hebrew Bible. 36 times we hear God say to love those who are foreigners, outsiders, because the people of Israel were strangers in Egypt, and strangers need help.

Two weeks ago a government official articulated a distorted vision of a Catholic doctrine, *ordo amoris* (order of love). He said: "*You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country. And then after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.*" Essentially, he was articulating priorities – family first, then your neighbor, church, community, nation – and then, if there is anything left over, the rest of the world.

So why not cut USAID or other programs for strangers, foreigners, enemies beyond our borders? Then that Tuesday Pope Francis [published a letter](#) attacking the current policy of mass deportations, and in that letter he appeared to directly address this argument. Francis wrote: *“Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups...The true ordo amoris that must be promoted is love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.” Without exception. Even enemies.*

When we let go of fear or judgment, we see another person – not a monster. We discover a shared humanity. Then we are able to find common ground and understanding – and maybe even laughter. So like Detective Stephen McDonald we are called to release our suspicion and hatred, our desire for revenge and thirst for violence. Then, perhaps, we can transform an enemy into a friend, and heal our souls of the wounds of vengeance, bigotry, fear, and cold-heartedness. Then, perhaps, we can be free and strong enough to love. Thanks be to God. Amen.