

Widening the Circle
Luke 6:27-38
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
February 24, 2019
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If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...If anyone takes away your coat, give your shirt as well...If anyone curses you, bless them...

These are among the instructions we hear from the mouth of Jesus in Luke, chapter 6. Here, during the sermon that Luke positions on the level plain, right after the recitation of the beatitudes which in Luke include not only blessings but woes – you remember...blessed are the poor, woe to you who are rich; blessed are the hungry, woe to you who are full...here as this sermon continues, Jesus pushes us again toward behavior that just doesn't seem natural.

After all we live in a world where it often seems the first response is more likely to be retribution, repayment for a hurt with another hurt. Sometimes, too often, the response is even to react not only with an equal hurt, but with something more extreme. And yet, Jesus' instruction points us in a different direction.

And so, again, we are reminded that following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It is not for those who like to sit in their cushy positions and just be affirmed. Rather, following Jesus asks much of us and in so many ways asks us to surrender our rights as individuals and our values as people of this world, and to instead choose the ways and the heart of Jesus.

And, again, we can talk pretty easily about such concepts when we sit here in our safe sanctuary with people with whom we are in relationship, people with whom we share common values. But what happens between Sundays? What happens when someone actually curses you or strikes you or takes something from you? What is our response then? Because, friends, this is not easy stuff.

And all too often this sort of non-violent, non-retaliatory response has been dismissed because of a misconception that it means we become doormats to those who would abuse or take advantage, or become targets for every bully or thief. And yet that isn't what Jesus is talking about. Jesus isn't saying that we simply need to allow those who choose evil to have their way and to do whatever they want. Remember, frequently Jesus was heard holding people accountable in the face of their evil or misguided choices.

Rather than inviting us to become doormats, in these words and in the model of his life, Jesus invites us to live as those actively who extend the mercy of God to others.

See often by the time we get toward the end of today's reading we've quit listening because it's just so difficult. But, if we keep paying attention, we will hear those words in verse 36, "Be merciful, just as [God] is merciful." "Mercy is releasing people and circumstances from recrimination they deserve. Mercy is one of God's primary qualities."¹ And if mercy is a quality of God, then as those who claim to love God, it is to be a quality of ours as well.

And, in this passage we are also reminded that there are times when it is easy to live from God's heart. In fact, loving those who love us, sharing with those who share with us, sacrificing for those who sacrifice for us – these are things we do with or without God. These are things that are easy for anyone. The challenge of this text is to take it a step further – to engage in true mercy, giving and forgiving even beyond expectation, even when it is difficult.

Because our faith asks us to go the step further. After all, reacting to people in the easiest ways – whether hating those who are mean or loving those who love us – isn't the goal. It is the place that we begin...it is, largely, a natural human response. But in these words, and in our faith, we are asked to go further.

¹ Ronald J. Allen, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3967

And what is this place we are invited to step into? It is the act of living in God's kin-dom and inviting others to do the same. "Instead of responding to various forms of threat with corresponding recrimination, the [kin-dom or] Realm [of God] calls for attitudes and actions that seek the good of the other, and, hence, that build up the community."² The question, then, becomes both, "What kind of a world do we want to live in?" and "What kind of a world does God desire?" And once we can begin to identify characteristics of the world God desires, then the invitation is for us to live in those ways. In other words, "If you want to live in a world that has the qualities of the [kin-dom], then treat other people in [kin-dom]-like ways, especially as described [here]."³

Friends, no one is saying this is easy. Christians for centuries can affirm that it is a challenge that is issued here. But, for the sake of our world and our humanity, it is so important. Because when we see beyond an evil act, when we see beyond someone's worst mistake, when we see beyond the surface, what we are likely to find is that the world is full of people who are waiting for an invitation to be part of something better, people who are so often just getting by.

See, the other thing we don't want to miss in today's scripture is that while Jesus doesn't ask us to become best friends with everyone who mistreats us, he does ask us to behave in such a way that invites people into something better. When we pray for an enemy or give more than what is taken, when we walk that extra mile or refuse to respond in violence, then we invite the other into a world full of possibilities they might not even know exist. And the world is full of people who need to see another way, another possibility, who just need a little taste of mercy.

² Allen.

³ Allen.

The instructions of Jesus we read in Luke 6 don't only challenge us, but they invite us to widen the circle, to invite others in to a different way, to commit again ourselves to living in the ways of God's kin-dom.

What would the world be like if we truly lived in these ways? What would the world be like if those of us who have already claimed Jesus, who already call ourselves his followers, made it a point to will good for our enemies and to pray for those who mistreat us? What would the world be like if we gave without expectation of return and if we gave more than was asked? What would the world be like if we did not respond with judgment but with understanding? What would the world look like if instead of rejecting others we extended an invitation for them to come and experience God's mercy?

Maybe some people don't deserve it. But maybe that doesn't matter. Maybe, just maybe, there is enough heaviness in this world, enough stress and disappointment, enough hatred and hurt. And maybe, as people of God, one of our callings is to let in a little light, to give another chance, to extend an invitation, and to help people see another way.

This week in a blog post, John Pavlovitz wrote this, "I walked around today and I looked at people; those passing me in the grocery store, driving beside me on the highway, filling my newsfeed, walking by the house. I tried to really see them.

"I tried to look beneath the surface veneer they wore; to imagine the invisible burdens they might be carrying beneath it: sick children, relational collapse, financial tension, crippling depression, profound grief, crisis of faith, loss of purpose—or maybe just the custom designed multitude of the nagging insecurities and fears they've been carrying around since grade school and have never been able to shake.

“As I looked at all these people, I wondered what kind of specific and personal hell they might be enduring, and it reminded me—so I’m reminding you:

“Life is stunningly short and it is eggshell fragile. Most people are having a really tough time. They are almost always in more pain than you think they are. Everyone is doing the very best they can to get through this day, and many are going through all manner of horrors in the process. No one is immune from the invasive collateral damage of living.”⁴

Friends, life can be hard. And sometimes it is we who visit hurt upon one another. But we are invited to choose another way. We are invited to live in such a way that the invitation is open, that the circle is widened, that people see in our living a glimpse of God’s kin-dom.

May it be so.

⁴ <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2018/01/20/life-short-people-hurting-dont-ahole/>