

“Love, Do, Bless, Pray” (Flipping the Script)

Text: Luke 6: 27-38

Rev. Meredith Loftis

February 24, 2019

Epiphany 7C

This morning we turn to the middle of Luke 6 where Jesus is delivering his Sermon on the Plain. After retreating to pray on a mountain, Jesus returns with his disciples to the people who are below on a field or level place. People have gathered from all over, from Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon to be healed and to hear this remarkable man’s teachings. He commences with those blessings and those woes, what we’ve called the beatitudes...”Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” And then Jesus continues with the following in Luke 6:27-38:

**27** “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28** bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. **29** If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. **30** Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. **31** Do to others as you would have them do to you. **32** “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **33** If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. **34** If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. **35** But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. **36** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. **37** “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; **38** give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

It was a magical, warm summer night in Washington, DC as eight friends gathered around a patio table to dine on food and wine. It was a time of celebration, lifting up friendship and family, reliving the joys of the year. Stories and memories littered the night air as the friends conversed into the growing darkness.

Michael Rabdau was there with his wife and daughter, and recalls that it was getting late, around 10pm. That’s when it happened.

“I was standing beside my wife and I just saw this arm with a long-barrelled gun come between us. It was as if in slow motion this hand [appeared]. And then it just got really quiet.” Startled, they sit frozen as they realize a newcomer has joined them.

A man, medium height, dressed in high-end sweats, had appeared out of nowhere and placed a gun first at the head of Michael’s friend, Christina. And then to the head of Michael’s wife. And he said, “Give me your money.” Repeating this over and over. “Or I’m going to start shooting.”

But there was a problem. No one had any money. So they started trying to find a way to dissuade the man. They tried shaming him, asking him what his mother would have thought of him doing this. They tried several more tactics, but the man won't budge, the gun flashing from face to face.

Michael realizes that this is heading into a dangerous situation.

But then, one of the women, pipes up and says, "We're here celebrating. Why don't you have a glass of wine?"

It was like a switch had been flipped. The man's whole demeanor instantly changed, his face easing into something different, calmer. He tastes the wine and says, "That's a really good glass of wine." Then he reached down, tasted the cheese and puts the gun in his pocket. Then he said something that no one expected, "I think I've come to the wrong place." And everyone just looked at him and someone said, "Hey, we understand." And for a moment they all just sat there together, having increased their fellowship by one member, inviting a stranger into their space—an extended invitation changing the dynamics in an instant.

The group remained calm, seeing the man before them, wondering about his story. And then he said something strange. "Can I get a hug?" Without hesitation, Michael's wife turned to him and embraced him. Then his other friends hugged him. And then he asks, "Can we have a group hug?" So everyone got up and formed a circle around the man and hugged him.

"It was very strange," says Michael. But they didn't hesitate, somehow recognizing the need this man had and allowing their humanity to mingle and heal with his humanity.

He said he was sorry, stood up with the glass of wine, and wandered out of the yard. The friends, of course, release their collective breathes and dive into processing what just happened. Later that evening, the wine glass was found in the alley, set carefully upright, not toppled over or smashed, but set intentionally with care.

All they could do was run into the house and cry in gratitude. It was like a miracle.<sup>1</sup> What had just happened? The script had been flipped. What should have ended in violence and possibly death, instead ended in an unexpected invitation to join in; an unexpected gesture of kindness and welcome that changes the enemy into one who receives that love and is transformed.

I've recently gotten on the podcast bandwagon, listening to all kinds of interesting interviews and stories; my favorite being NPR's podcast called *Invisibilia*, which explores human life through psychology, often touching upon our amazing human nature and what we discover about each other. "Humans tend to naturally mirror each other," states Chris Hopwood, a professor at Michigan State University, which is called complementary behavior. Non-retaliatory actions, what we see at the dinner party (or not responding in kind) is called non-complementary behavior, meaning, when a person approaches another with hostility, instead of reacting in a similar hostile manner, the script is flipped, and the person responding makes a choice to respond in a non-hostile way.

Recognizing that the man with the gun was expecting resistance, he is completely caught off guard when he is invited to join them. An offer of wine from strangers breaks him open; a hug gives him a new connection that he craved.

Jesus sums this behavior up in a more succinct way, in the WAY that we are each called: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

---

<sup>1</sup> "Flip the Script" by NPR's *Invisibilia* podcast. Season 2, July 16, 2016.

In a split second, a dangerous situation with a strange intruder turns into a miraculous story that bears unexpected life and new community, even if just for a moment; perhaps even healing where there was brokenness.

I imagine many of us may be sitting here, thinking, could I respond in the same way? I, too, wonder this. This is a pretty dramatic example. Perhaps we aren't faced with such abrupt violence, but because we are broken and sinful people, we can't help but see the consequences of our sin. We each have our own enemies, though perhaps we don't use such strong language. Perhaps we don't have a Darth Vader or Lord Voldemort in our lives, but we do experience violence in our society and culture. It might not be physical violence, but extreme measures that still cause brokenness—violence due to disagreement, fear, separating ourselves from others, and narratives that reflect that we don't really know how to handle those who are different or foreign to us. We are quick to react in kind if we feel threatened. But what if we were quick to love and offer mercy instead?

This passage is a laundry list of instructions that we have heard over and over and over again: love, do, bless, pray, forgive. Yet it is a laundry list that is yet to be checked off by any but Jesus. Only he is the one that can truly preach this sermon, the one that upended the world's script by laying down his life for us. He flipped the script when God declared that God's love could never die.

“Love of enemies is but one theme among many in this [passage], but it is the dominant one”<sup>2</sup> and is repeated once again, highlighting how crucial it is. Jesus is laying down the basic rules of love through the rest of this scripture. “You are not to reciprocate, retaliate, or behave as those who victimize you. The first rule is always love. In fact, if one should strike your cheek, offer the other as well.”

Consider that in the time of Jesus, there was a proper way for a master to strike a slave or servant. “You would stand facing your master, and he would strike your right cheek with the back of his right hand. Because this was the proper way to strike the cheek, doing it any other way would be a loss of face. So imagine what happens if, after having been struck on the right cheek, you stand there and silently turn your head and seemingly offer your left cheek? If you act this out, you'll see that it is not possible to strike the left cheek with the back of the right hand.” “Standing there offering your left cheek actually becomes an act of resistance. Your master is unable to discipline you in the accepted fashion - his powerlessness is exposed for all to see - and with that he is shamed and dishonored. And more importantly, you have exposed the reality that master and slave are not in the right relationship reflective”<sup>3</sup> of God's commandments. However, a disclaimer: let me be in clear in saying that I do not condone abusive relationships, nor do I believe that Jesus was suggesting so. This scripture's audience, those living as minorities in pagan-filled, Roman territories, is made of those often living under oppression—those who have no choice at times but to endure Roman soldiers, slave owners, and other oppressors. Yet, this scripture has been used in dangerous ways way too often to insist that abuse is okay, that marriages or relationships should stay together even if one spouse is abusive. The victim should just put up with abuse and should pray for the abuser. This is absolutely not so. This is not how we are called to be faithful people. God does not desire that we should live in misery and pain. God desires that we live in freedom, always working for justice and mercy.

---

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: Luke*, page 89.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.holytextures.com/2013/01/luke-6-27-38-year-c-epiphany-7-february-18-february-24-sermon.html>

Yes, love is patient and love is kind, those familiar words of I Corinthians 13 ring through our ears. But they are bolder than how we tend to use them. Love is courageous and powerful, seeking to build up the other, no matter who they are. Love is not passive, but faithfully lived into when we remember that at every step of the way, God actively seeks us out; love becomes a form of active resistance that changes the seemingly impossible into the miraculous. Love does not mean we allow violence to happen in our lives, that we allow others to trample all over us; love means fully acknowledging the humanity and image of God in the other and treating them as such, meanwhile, insisting that the other person look fully at who you are. Love points to a God who seeks justice.

Should they take your coat, give them your robe too! Similarly, not just anyone would take away your coat. “Typically, this would be a soldier, and the taking of the coat would be extortion.” Yes, you might be naked, embarrassed, but “what is exposed is the injustice.”<sup>4</sup> You have not responded in kind, but taken an approach that Jesus insists is better. You have flipped the script, not responding with brutality, but insisting that that person view your humanity in connection to theirs.

“Rather than a person hating in response to hatred and loving in response to love, Christian behavior and relationships are prompted by the God we worship who does not react but acts in love and grace toward all,” writes noted preacher Fred Craddock.<sup>5</sup> This is what we should hang onto, that grace was first given to us and has become our identity. It is grace on which we stand every moment of our lives. We are likewise to extend that grace in a world that is so desperate for it. What does grace look like when you extend it?

“When I read Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain,” writes Jill Duffield. “I don’t think so much of loving far-away enemies (although that’s important), I hear Jesus’ call to seek reconciliation with those closest to me, those I’ve harmed, knowingly and unknowingly. Being merciful requires proximity, saying, “Come closer to me,” not to wound or punish, but to talk, embrace, and kiss. Loving those we are not inclined to love means recognizing the impulse to do otherwise, and turning toward them instead of pushing them away.”<sup>6</sup>

Isn’t this what we see happen with Joseph and his brothers in our Old Testament story? Joseph has every reason to seek revenge on his siblings after they leave him for dead in a pit. He is enslaved and imprisoned, yet God’s grace follows him. When he reveals who he is to his brothers, they are stunned into silence, their fear growing rapidly as they realize that he’s probably about to order their deaths. Doesn’t he have every right? Instead, he shouts, “Come closer to me.” He desires their presence, their humanities and souls to mingle with his, that he might offer reconciliation and mercy. That they might both be healed. So he flips the script, “attributing their sinister behavior to divine providence, as life preserving in the midst of death....He kisses them, weeps on their necks, loves those who hurt him, caused his exile and eventually came begging for his help. No judgement, only forgiveness. No humiliation, only mercy. No punishment, only provision.”<sup>7</sup>

This is what God calls us to do. To love all people, even our enemies. To do good for all people, even our enemies. To bless them and pray for them. Enemies included. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.holytextures.com/2013/01/luke-6-27-38-year-c-epiphany-7-february-18-february-24-sermon.html>

<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: Luke*, page 90.

<sup>6</sup> Looking into the Lectionary - Ordinary 7C. The Presbyterian Outlook.

<sup>7</sup> Looking into the Lectionary - Ordinary 7C. The Presbyterian Outlook.