

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany – February 24, 2019
Luke 6:27-38

So, were you paying attention when I was reading the Gospel lesson? Did you hear what Jesus was teaching? Surely, he didn't really mean it... no one can live like that! Turn the other cheek? Refuse no one who begs from you? Love your enemy; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you? Be merciful and perfect like God?

I have to admit that whenever I read this particular lesson there is part of me desperately searching for a way to make it a bit easier. Surely, Jesus is describing a set of values to which his disciples should aspire but which are truly unobtainable in this life. These must be the perfect goals that we work towards in bettering ourselves. Or maybe Jesus is just saying all this to reveal the impossibility of human righteousness, for we clearly can do no good without God's grace. Or maybe he is only saying this to his disciples and not really expecting this of us. I mean, those guys must be more holy, if for no other reason than because they have been right there with Jesus. Or, even better, maybe this teaching is not really so much about how we are supposed to live in perfect love (which looks a lot like perfect surrender in giving), but instead Jesus is teaching nonviolent means of resistance against injustice, especially for those who are oppressed. I've read a number of scholars who have made this convincing argument.

They say that to strike someone on the cheek usually refers to a slap, and often to a backhanded slap, which is more an insulting and shaming act than a particularly injurious one. To offer the other cheek, then, would require striking it with a fist, which is to acknowledge the other person as an equal rather than an inferior, thus denying the aggressor's power to humiliate another. Scholars note that Jewish men at the time wore two garments: a wool tunic with a heavier cloak over it. Jesus teaches that if someone takes your cloak from you, you should also give up your tunic. And by giving up both garments, the you brings shame upon the other by forcing him to look upon your nakedness.

Yes, these explanations are certainly better....they make these lessons of Jesus much more palatable. Even so, while they may be true, they are still incomplete and only reveal part of message. To stop here would be an effective way to find well-crafted loopholes around the audacity of Jesus' teaching and the way he invites his disciples to follow.

Unfortunately, I have bad news for you today. You're not going to like this. I think Jesus means *exactly* what he says. He really means it... seriously. Jesus, indeed, is calling us to a life of non-retaliation and love. He wants us not only to forgive our enemies but to love them as we do our friends. He wants us to bless and pray for those who hate us, surrender whatever is demanded, and give away anything to those who ask, expecting nothing in return. He wants us to see our common humanity in those who persecute and offend us, and respond in love and blessing. He wants us to be merciful as God is merciful. And lest we delude ourselves otherwise, near the end of our lesson today Jesus says this: "love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return... Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." (6:35, 37-38a) You see, to follow Jesus is to do as he does...to enact the coming kingdom of God here and now, where all are equal, all are loved, and all are granted the grace of mercy.

Jesus makes a theological argument that goes something like this: disciples are to love their neighbors and their enemies just as they love themselves. In this way, disciples imitate God and become children of God, as God himself blesses the righteous and unrighteous without distinction. This, in fact, is the mark of discipleship, that one imitates God: be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful. Jesus calls us to be perfect imitators of God's ways. In Matthew's version of this same teaching, Jesus seems to take this command even further by imploring his disciples to be "perfect",

as their heavenly Father is perfect. I would argue that, in this case, merciful and perfect are synonyms.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus makes it clear that to be like God (or perfect) is to be merciful as God is merciful. And as God shows mercy and pours out His grace upon all of us, deserving or not, we, too, should show mercy and love to all – even those who we may not feel are deserving. But this perfect love and mercy to which Jesus calls us is often overwhelming and discouraging to contemplate. Not only does it seem impossible but also in opposition to the very nature of creation, at least since the Fall. If I am honest with myself, I know that I rarely feel that I respond to others with the same mercy and grace that God grants me.

Thankfully, I believe that Jesus' call to be merciful and perfect is a process of transformation in which we participate – that perfection may be something we achieve rather than a prerequisite. To be perfect and merciful is not a state of being, rather it is something we do. And through the doing – through the imitation of God's ways – we will find our hearts transformed. And praise be to God for that. The way of Jesus is the way of transformation – of becoming the beloved children of God that we were created to be; living lives of love, justice, and mercy. The gulf between who I am now and who I want to be, who God has created me to be, has always seemed too broad and too deep to bridge. My spirit too weak and my heart too hard. But God gives us the path... and Jesus shows us what it looks like to be godlike in a human way.

In 12-step recovery groups, there is a saying: You can't think yourself into right action; you act yourself into right thinking. Righteous and merciful action not only is good and sows the seeds of God's love in a hurting world, but it is also transformative. Acting mercifully and imitating the ways of God can change the state of the world as well as the state of our own hearts.

This, of course, is the purpose of the Mosaic Law. Following the Torah provides the essential road map and is the beginning. But Jesus calls us to wade into even deeper waters, for the ultimate goal is to have the law written upon our hearts – this is to live the Law of Love. Not merely to follow the letter of the law in our actions, but to live the law in such a way as to inhabit the spirit of the Law and be perfect imitators of God's merciful ways.

As Jesus points out, the key to all of this is love. Jesus makes clear that the deepest intention of the will of God is love, love toward God, neighbor, and even one's enemy. Fulfilling the law is an exercise of love, translated into justice, compassion, and faith. The love to which Jesus calls us is understood not simply as affection... no, this love is the kingdom of God enacted within our lives. It is love expressed through actions, in the mercy, forgiveness, and blessing extended to everyone – enemies as well as friends.

We may not always be able (or willing) to feel this Godly merciful love, but we can choose to act in loving ways – ways that reflect God's nature. *In this way, love is not only our destination but also our means of getting there.* Through love, or even merely loving acts, we enter the fullness of life and allow God's grace to flow through us and transform us. Over time, our hearts are more fully formed and become the deep wells from which the living waters of love, justice, and mercy are sourced, allowing us to live fully human lives which bear more perfectly the image of God.

Yes, the bad news I bring today is that Jesus really does mean exactly what he says, and being his disciples means we follow in his ways and do as he teaches. The good news is that through the incarnation of God in Christ, we are shown what it looks like to live the law of love of in the world. Following the way of Jesus, we learn how to be perfect bearers of God's image and imitators of God's ways. And when we are wholehearted in our devotion, we find ourselves enjoying the fullness of the kingdom of God.

Amen.