

In The Same Direction
A Sermon on Luke 6 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ February 20, 2022

Our congregation at St. Paul's Church resembles St. Paul's congregation in the city of Corinth, back in the 1st century in the fact that we are a congregation comprised of diverse people, from diverse backgrounds, having diverse experiences and bringing diverse gifts to our congregation. We are characterized, not by who we are, but by our commitment to move in the direction Jesus is pointing toward. We are moving in the direction of love.

This is what today's Gospel lesson is about. It is about moving in the direction of love. In today's lesson we are in the middle of Luke chapter 6, in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain.

It might help to think of the Sermon on the Plain in three sections. We heard the first portion last week: the blessings and the woes, or perhaps the blessings and the warnings, also known as the Beatitudes. This week we hear the middle portion, which we might think of as the direct instructions, the prose portion, in contrast to the poetry of the Beatitudes. The last portion of the sermon is a set of two parables that illustrate the main ideas presented in the first two sections.

I'm describing the structure of the entire sermon because Jesus' instructions can seem a bit overwhelming. The first verse of today's Gospel is one of the most difficult in the entire New Testament. *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* This is not in the category of easy religious practices. Yet we who follow Jesus are seeking to love others as much as we can, even to love our enemies.

The foundation for understanding Jesus' instructions for us to love our enemies is the Beatitudes that immediately precede this set of instructions. The Beatitudes help us understand that this burden of loving our enemies does not fall upon each person with equal weight.

In order to understand how this works, let's think about the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph and his brothers were enemies earlier in their lives. Joseph was younger than his brothers. Joseph told his brothers about his dreams, about the images where their haystacks bowed down before his haystack. The brothers also hated Joseph because his father loved him so much.

So the older brothers captured Joseph and threw him into a pit. Most of them wanted to kill him, but Ruben intervened and suggested they sell him as a slave to some slave traders. The brothers viewed Joseph as their enemy. Joseph probably viewed his brothers as his enemies.

But Jesus' directions for us to love our enemies fall more heavily on those with the most wealth and power. This is a direct challenge to the assumptions many of us make in America. In America I have often heard those who live in places of great comfort, wealth and security say something like, "we don't have a problem with racism in our community" or "everyone feels safe here." In America, we often think the problem of violence and conflict is a problem primarily for the poor.

Jesus would not agree. Jesus calls each one of us to love our enemies, but the burden for resolving the conflicts and treating others, not as enemies but as friends, falls most heavily on those who have power and wealth. The Beatitudes are the frame for Jesus' instructions. The Beatitudes help us understand that the first question to ask is, 'who has the power to make a change?' Those who have the greatest power, such as members of congress, Justices of the Supreme Court, the President, and state level leaders have the greatest responsibility for resolving the problem of violence in America.

The next step in understanding how we should love our enemies is found at the end of this passage. Jesus instructs us to refrain from judging others. This is the next step. Jesus emphasizes this idea in the parable that follows. It is the parable where one person sees a speck of dirt in his neighbor's eye and fails to see the log in their own eye. This is a parable about not judging others, and is directly connected to these instructions for us to love our enemies.

The next idea about loving our enemies is found in these confusing verses: *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.* When I was a child I thought these verses somehow meant that if other kids started beating me up on the playground I should bear the blows cheerfully and without resistance. This is not what Jesus is talking about. The connection

of these verses to the Beatitudes contradicts any notion that those who are weaker or less powerful should submit to the attacks of those who are more powerful.

In these verses Jesus is referring to the workings of the justice system of 1st century Judea. In Jesus' time your enemy might be the neighbor who accused you of a crime and brought a case against you. The punishment might be for the neighbor to strike you on the cheek, or for the neighbor to take your outer cloak as payment for the offense.

There was a system of justice based on vengeance more than on fact finding. Loving our neighbors means not seeking vengeance. Loving our neighbors means not operating in the legalistic realm. Following the rules is important, but if we are loving others we won't be leaning on the rules.

This leads to the next idea about love in this passage: love is not transactional. Let's notice that, once again, Jesus is telling us what love is not. Love is not transactional. *If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?* Love is not transactional. Love is not engaged in judging others. Love is not legalistic or vengeful.

It is a bit more difficult to see clearly what love is, as opposed to what it is not. Love is from God, so it is often difficult for us to even describe what it actually looks like. One positive idea about love is in the final verse of our passage. *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.* This verse describes the process of buying and selling in the marketplace. It was common for people to use dishonest measures in order to increase their profits. The main idea here is honesty.

If we are loving others, and loving our neighbors we will be honest and tell the truth. Telling and hearing the truth are a foundation for those who strive to love. As with everything else in life, we have to practice this in order to get it right. As with everything else, it is much easier to practice this with easy relationships than with bad relationships. So those of us who are practicing telling the truth should begin with people who are easy to love. Perhaps then we could practice telling the truth, with love and genuine concern, with people who are just minor enemies, perhaps a friendly rival, or a brother or sister or cousin. With a great amount of practice we may get to the place where we are able to tell the truth and listen to the truth with care and compassion from our long time enemies.

Jesus' next positive idea about love is found in the third portion of the Sermon on the Plain, which we have not read today. It is in the parable of the fig tree. "Each tree is known by the fruit that it bears." This is a parable about productivity. God intends for us to be productive and creative.

Love is not destructive of other people and things they have created. Love does not stand on the sidelines while others do all the work. Love is engaged in the work. If we love other people, we will be engaged in solving the problems with them. If we are loving our enemies we will be talking with them and trying to find creative solutions to them. Love is productive and creative.

The last idea about love in this passage is found in two words: *Be merciful. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* Love means acting with mercy and forgiveness.

Many of these ideas about love, including the ideas about loving our enemies, come into clear focus in the story of Joseph and his brothers from Genesis 45. If you want to know what it looks like to love your enemies, read the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him. They did not want to hear the truth he was telling them. Years later Joseph responded by forgiving them, by engaging with them, by not being legalistic or vengeful.

This is a powerful story of love, yet we who read the Beatitudes as our scripture understand Joseph had a responsibility to forgive his brothers and to care for them. This may be helpful for us as we seek to understand the meaning of the Beatitudes. Joseph did love his brothers, without a doubt. Yet, because of his power and wealth, he also had an obligation to help them.

It works that way for us. We have been loved by God; this is why we are here. We seek to love others in the same way that God has loved us. We try to forgive others, in the same way that God has forgiven us. We seek to love all people, not just the ones who have shown kindness to us. We are not always good at loving our enemies, but we try the best we can. This is what unites us. We are committed to moving in the direction Jesus is pointing toward. We are moving in the direction of love.