

E7C 2022 Luke 6:27-38

Lent begins very late this year, almost as late as it can be, which means that we very rarely get to today's gospel in our Sunday lectionary. I appreciate those other years because I don't like this part of Luke's gospel. Frankly, I don't want to do what Jesus tells me to do.

As we listen to Jesus' sermon, it is worth remembering that he did not invent a new moral code. Jesus taught from his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and even warns his contemporaries that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The golden rule that Jesus teaches here isn't even unique to his tradition: every world religion includes the basic principle that we should do to others what we would want them to do to us. That's a good place from which to calibrate our moral compass; at the very least, we do no harm if we follow these instructions. If my general outlook on life in community is to treat other people how I want to be treated, that sounds like a reasonable goal.

The problem is that Jesus doesn't stop at our treatment of the general public; Jesus gets specific and instructs us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who abuse us, to repay various kinds of cruelty and imposition with patience and generosity. Now, if this was one of those times where Jesus was teaching us to think in a different way, we might try to re-define how we see "enemies." I might remind you that the person who holds an opposing view on an issue about which you are passionate may not be your enemy so much as an adversary; that an evenly split committee or board shouldn't make enemies out of those with conflicting votes; that the student or coworker at the next desk who is trying just as hard as you are may be a competitor but isn't really an enemy. That's a good sermon, and sometimes we need to hear that sermon, but this isn't that sermon.

Jesus is not encouraging us to think more charitably and inclusively toward our rivals. Jesus is talking about our unmistakable enemies: those who hate us, those who curse us, those who abuse us, those who humiliate us, those who take from us. Jesus doesn't ask us to find a different way to think about these people so that we no longer see them as our enemies. Jesus asks us to look at our enemies, in all of their nastiness, to identify exactly what they have done to earn our righteous indignation and to kindle in us the burning desire for vengeance, but to forgo inflicting on them the retribution they so richly deserve. He doesn't want us to pretend that our enemies are somehow our friends; he wants us to acknowledge that they are, in fact, our enemies, but to show them mercy anyway.

There was a time in my life when, although I had rivals, competitors, and people whose behavior I found annoying, I would have said that I couldn't really call anyone a true enemy, and I would have meant it. I can't say that any more. If you can't identify any enemies in your life, good for you, but I've had people lie to and about me; I've had people use and take advantage of me; I've asked people to stop saying or doing hurtful things, and they haven't stopped. During this pandemic, I have had people tell me outright that even though they know I'm at high risk, they won't take precautions to protect my health and my life. How do you love the people who at best treat you with indifference and at worst treat you with hate?

I am compelled to clarify that this passage neither validates abusers nor condemns victims to remain in danger and suffering. The bit about turning the other cheek is not about a physical challenge but the insult that comes with it—shaming the perpetrator as the one in the wrong. But if you have suffered at the literal or figurative hands of an enemy, you know that Jesus might as well ask you to move a mountain as to try to find love in your heart for that person. Fortunately, that's not what Jesus asks.

Jesus does not call us to have warm and fuzzy feelings for our enemies; Jesus calls us to treat our enemies better than they have treated us *in spite of* the cold and prickly feelings we have for them. Gospel love is action: it's about what we *do*. When our every instinct screams that we should seek revenge, Jesus tells us to be merciful. When we are so angry the only words that come to mind are curses, Jesus tells us to bless and pray for our enemies. He knows it's not what we want to do, not what we feel like doing, not what seems natural to us; but he tells us to do it anyway, to go beyond justice all the way to mercy.

I would love to tell you that when we show the radical love of Jesus to our enemies it melts their hard little hearts, they see the error of their ways, and they seek reconciliation and restoration. Maybe, sometimes, but I'm not holding my breath. Our mercy might not change *them*, but that's not why Jesus tells us to do it. *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* We're not supposed to be getting down in the mud to get even with other people; we're supposed to be growing more like God. And when we practice mercy toward others, it just might help us better understand how merciful God is toward *us*, because in the grand scheme of things, we're no picnic, either. Jesus calls us to do hard things and this is one of them. May God give us the strength to answer that call.