

“Love Initiative” GPPC 2-24-19
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40, Luke 6:27-38

This morning we continue reading from the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel that our high school youth started us on last Sunday. Jesus is speaking to his disciples in what’s often called “The Sermon on the Plain.” As one scholar points out, this sermon is for “those who are ready to accept Jesus’ call to a greater righteousness, and is therefore introduced with the words, ‘But I say to you that listen.’” (Justo L. González, *Luke*, 94.) This part of the sermon is divided into three sections—verses 27-31, verses 32-36, and verses 37-38.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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...”

“Love your enemies...”

Seriously, Jesus? Of all the strange and difficult commands that come from the Lord, this may be the strangest, most difficult, and most counter-cultural of all. Thousands of our movies are structured not

Jeff Paschal

around love of enemies, but hatred of them, inventive ways to get back at enemies, how to destroy enemies. Sports sometimes function that way too. Cheap shots are rewarded with cheap shots. Revenge and payback. Someone, I believe it was one of you dear church members, has made off with my prized copy of the UNC/Duke basketball rivalry titled, *To Hate Like This is to be Happy Forever*. When I find out who took it, you're going to pay! (Kidding.)

Public discourse and politics have often devolved from passionate and reasoned dialogue into dirty tricks, revenge, and even criminal behavior. Because, the thinking goes, "the ends justify the means." Except they don't.

And, of course, in recent decades our country always has enemies that we are fighting in war or preparing to fight in war. Particularly troublesome is the most recent administration decision to scrap nuclear weapons reduction and deploy medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Russia has threatened to respond by placing missiles closer and faster to reach the U.S. Do we really want another situation like the Cuban Missile Crisis? MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction, indeed.

Jeff Paschal

“But I say to you that *listen*, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

What do we do with such commands from Jesus, the one who is our Lord and Savior? If we’re wise, we do listen, seek to understand, and we take these commands seriously.

Notice a couple of things right away. First, Jesus assumes his followers will have enemies. Why? Because as we follow Jesus in our halting and imperfect way, we will “speak the truth in love,” stand up for the oppressed, help the poor, and confront evil. And evil will not say, “Well, that’s fine. No problem. I’ll quit being evil, because you’ve asked so nicely.” No. Evil will fight against goodness. And the more good we do, the more evil will fight against us. As one Christian pastor asked, “If I’m following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk?” And as novelist John Irving once said, enemies are the requirement “of any robust life, the very proof of its strength.” (John Irving, *A Widow for One Year*, interview with the author)

Jeff Paschal

Jesus expects Christians will have enemies. And he doesn't say we have to like them. Instead, he insists that we *love* them which is different from liking them. When we love our enemies, Jesus says we are to “do good” to them, “bless them,” and “pray for them.” In other words, love means trying to say, think, and do what is best for our enemies. And this is sometimes very hard. Of course, the only thing harder in the long run is to hate them.

Jesus goes even further by talking about strategies for loving our enemies. He says, “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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”

So what's Jesus doing here? He is telling his followers not to sit back and be victims of their enemies. He is telling Christians to take the initiative with love. As he dealt with the most hate-filled enemies, Dr. Martin Luther King offered this response. “To our most bitter opponents we say, ‘We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with

Jeff Paschal

soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you.

We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 56.)

As we deal with enemies, Jesus calls us to win a double victory by refusing victimhood, and refusing to fight hatred and evil with more hatred and evil, and instead take the initiative with love.

When I was a child I not only learned some karate to help me with bullies but also some judo. And the goal of judo is to take an opponent’s own force and own aggression and to use it against him, to put him off-balance.

Jeff Paschal

Theology professor Walter Wink says, “Shortly before the fall of political apartheid in South Africa, police descended on a squatters’ camp they had long wanted to demolish. They gave the few women there five minutes to gather their possessions, and then the bulldozers would level their shacks. The women, apparently sensing the residual puritanical streak in rural Afrikaners, stripped naked before the bulldozers. The police turned and fled. So far as I know, [he says] that camp still stands.” (Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 105-106.)

Instead of just being victims, these women used their enemies’ own power against them. They took the initiative of love in a creative way. How powerful is that? And how freeing for both sides is that?

I’m not going to spend much time with the center section of this sermon, verses 32-36, but simply to say Jesus is warning about tit for tat behavior. “So you love people who’re loving to you. And you’re kind to people who can be kind back to you. Big deal,” says Jesus. “Anybody could do that. You’re my followers, children of the Most High. So your calling is greater and more challenging. You’re to be merciful, just as your Father, your Divine Parent is merciful. That’s your calling.”

Jeff Paschal

Then in the final section, verses 37-38, Jesus says something that really gets misinterpreted and misused a lot in our time. He says, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.”

You hear this misinterpreted when somebody does something especially shabby, and someone else says something about it. And the person who has behaved badly then becomes indignant and says, “Who are you to judge me?” So the reasoning is, “Nobody can ever offer critique of what another person is doing, because Jesus said, ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged.’” This, of course, is nonsense and is not what Jesus means here.

All of us have to make ethical decisions every single day. And all of us make mistakes every single day. We also are part of families, communities, and communities of faith in which other people encourage us when we do right and challenge us when we do wrong. This is what we do as human beings, and especially as Christians. A good portion of the Bible is actually focused on making judgments about what we should think, say, and do. To be a person of faith in some sense is to be a person

Jeff Paschal

who makes judgments, decisions about right and wrong, all the time. So Jesus is not telling us just to shut up and let ourselves and other people run amok. That's insane.

So what does he mean when he says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged"? He means that you and I are not qualified to judge the totality of another human being. You and I don't know enough, and we are not good enough ourselves, to judge the entirety of other people. We don't know the history of others, the challenges they've faced and overcome, or continue to face. We don't know all their motivations, their addictions, their angels, and their demons.

Yes, we can and should encourage goodness and discourage evil in others and ourselves. But we have to do so remembering that God alone is qualified and will actually complete the final judgment of all human beings.

In fact, you and I are not even qualified to judge ourselves. As the Psalmist prayed, "Lord, clear me from hidden faults." God knows us better than we know ourselves. And the great news is that God loves us in spite of our stubbornness, sin, and evil. God chooses not to condemn

Jeff Paschal

us. God chooses to forgive us. And God calls us to forgo ultimate judgment and condemnation of others, and instead to choose the forgiveness we have already received from God.

So Jesus calls us to love our enemies, not to try judge the totality of their personhood. Jesus calls us not to be victims but to take the initiative of love, to be creative in our response to evil and enemies.

I wonder what that might look like for our country. Talking about one of our recent wars, Anne Lamott says, “A friend called today and said that since the war has begun, she finds herself inside a black hole half the time. ‘What if we gave fifty percent of our discretionary budget to the world’s poor,’ she said, ‘and then counted on the moral power of that action to protect us?’ Good Lord [writes Lamott]: What can you say in the face of such innocence?

“‘You didn’t stop taking those meds, did you?’ I asked.

“This made her laugh.” (Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 139-140.)

What if we as Christians in our country took Jesus seriously about love of enemies and we encouraged our government to come up with

Jeff Paschal

something more creative than another war with our enemies, or another aggressive policy? What if?

And what if this week, you and I spent some time thinking about people who are our enemies, or maybe just people who happen to be mad at us right now or we're mad at right now. And we prayed and tried to come up with some sort of creative, love initiative? It's not about being a victim. It's not about trying to judge the totality of another person. And it's not about saying that anything goes and nothing matters either.

It's about the creative, initiative of love. It's about creating a sphere of influence, maybe just a tiny one, like Star Wars a small "disturbance in the force" that says, "This time, at least, is going to be different. This time I will experience the blessing and love not only for my enemies but love for myself. I will do my part. And one day there will be the double victory of love." Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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