

Epiphany 7C: Luke 6:27-38
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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A Most (Im)Practical Way to Live

“It ain’t the parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts that I *do* understand.” That was the view expressed by the great American satirist Mark Twain, and it is what a good many of us feel, especially upon hearing a lesson like the one we just heard.

“Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Turn the other cheek. Give to everyone who asks of you.” The problem here isn’t that Jesus is speaking in veiled metaphors or airy abstractions. Jesus is straightforward—*too straightforward!* We know exactly what he expects us to do with regard to people we don’t like, who hurt us, persecute us, who hate us for whatever reason. It’s not that we don’t understand what Jesus is asking us. We do. That’s the problem. Or rather the problem is that his directions are hard. The most honest prayer I ever heard was related to me by a colleague. After a rather tough sermon on a difficult text that Sunday, the lay leader stood up and prayed: “Lord, today we’ve heard your word.... And we don’t like it. Amen.”

We don’t like it, and so we come up with reasons why Jesus didn’t really mean what he says. We say, “Of course, Jesus had some noble ideals, some lofty principles, but sadly it’s not applicable to the ‘real world.’ Things just don’t work that way.” The implication is that Jesus was a starry-eyed idealist, an impractical dreamer whose teaching, though laudable, is impractical. The implication is that the world Jesus lives in is fake, a fantasy at best, a deception at its worst. And while we may wish the world was different, we’re residing here, living as best we can. What Jesus is talking about may work for some other place, someplace different from the world we live in. But it’s a lifestyle that “just doesn’t work” here.

Jesus is not blind to this fact, though. He admits upfront that the way of life he is talking about is unconventional, counter-cultural even. The passage begins with “But I say to you who are listening...” That conjunction, “But,” is pivotal because it indicates that he is saying something that goes against widespread common sense. There were many times when Jesus said, “You have heard it said” (by nine-out-of-ten Judeans, by most experts, by your parents....), “*but I say.*” Whenever you hear a preacher say that, hold onto your hats, because their speaking is about to take us some place we haven’t been before. They’re about to rise above mere common sense and say something to us will surprise and maybe confuse us.

And Jesus is not idealistic about his audience, either. He addresses his words to “those who are listening.” Now, on the one hand, that’s a nod to the plain fact that a crowd has gathered around him and the disciples to listen to his teaching. But on a deeper level, “those who listen” is an acknowledgement that not everyone can hear this teaching, can take it in. Not everyone can or is ready to listen, to really hear. Fact is, we may be willing to hear, may try to be as open-minded as we can be to Jesus’ words, but it’s so hard to hear something that challenges the way we live and how our world is constructed.

And Jesus is always doing that, saying things that collide with our world. Besides “love your enemies and turn the other cheek,” Jesus is known for delivering other hard sayings: Don’t worry about your life. Deny yourself and take up your cross. Hate your mother and father. Rejoice when you are persecuted. Whoever divorces and marries another commits adultery. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

That’s a tall order. We naturally wonder, Is Jesus serious? Just narrowing it today’s lesson, how could he expect ordinary, typical people like us to conduct ourselves in this way: forgiving our enemies, not repaying the hurt others have done to us, blessing those who curse us? How could he expect this?

There are two answers we might give to this question: First, Jesus expects us to act this way because, well, his “impractical” teaching is ironically the *most practical way to live*. Now, I don’t mean “practical” in the sense that this way of life will lead to worldly success, as if becoming a doormat, making yourself as inoffensive as possible, so you don’t have any enemies, is the best way to go through life, to get along. That’s not what Jesus is saying, and that approach never works anyway. Nor is he suggesting that there’s not really anything we can do in the face of evil, so the most “practical” thing we can do is just suck it up and take it. That’s not what Jesus is saying either.

No, I mean “practical” in the sense that it is the “practice” that gets the best results. Here’s what I mean: There is in us a deep expectation of fairness, of reciprocity. Do to others as they do to you. You hear it in law, you hear it in politics, in movies, you hear it even among children. “Mom, he hit me.” “He hit me first.” “He hit me harder.” We give as good as we get. Someone hurts us, we want to get even, to get back for a slight or to settle a score. As people say, “an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.”

But Jesus throws out the old “Do to others as they do to you,” in favor of “Do to others as you *would have them* do to you.” What this means is, rather than let our reptilian brains react to aggression with aggression, we should step back and consider what is the best thing to do in the situation. We may feel entirely in the right, giving back as good as we got. It may seem like justice or at least justified. But Jesus asks us to consider what is more important—our being right, our sense of righteousness, or the other person and our relationship with them? And so rather than giving as good as we get, *we give better than we have gotten* to make room for the other person to change.

You know how when you get into a fight with someone, a colleague or sibling, neighbor or spouse, it quickly devolves into something like a snowball fight, with both combatants lobbing snowballs at each other from behind a wall, taking turns trying to hit each other and ducking between throws. But what happens when that expected bomb doesn’t come? You throw a snowballs but the other person doesn’t retaliate You don’t know what to do. You stick your head up, to test the situation. And when nothing happens, you have to decide what to do next. At that moment there’s an opportunity, an opportunity for change, to do something different.

It’s so easy to get in a cycle of violence and verbal assaults, throwing insults and injuries at each other. But when you don’t retaliate, don’t defend yourself, you break that cycle. And you force

the other person to change. Very few people change when they've been pounded into the ground. But when they are not pounded but know they deserve it, that's an opportunity, an invitation to change.

There's a powerful scene in the movie, *42*, about Jackie Robinson, where Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, is interviewing Robinson in his office before he hires him for the team. Knowing that Robinson will face prejudice as the first black man in the major leagues, Rickey taunts him, asking him what is he going to do when he gets mistreated, insulted, denied service on account of his race. Robinson jumps up, "You want a player who doesn't have the guts to fight back?" "No," Rickey answers, "No, I want a player who has the guts *not* to fight back." For that is the way, Rickey explains, they are going to win, to win hearts and minds, by standing with dignity and grace amidst injustice.

Now, even "Do to others as you would have them to do to you" isn't enough. It's not sufficient. Because treating people the same way that we want them to treat us implies that we—our feelings, moral sensibilities, and attitudes—are the source of morality: Think about the way you wish everybody treated you, and then universalize that into a general rule for everyone else. But if I honestly listed all the ways that I wish you treated me, all the things that I wish you would do for me, it wouldn't be a great moral code; it would be a picture of my own fantasies, self-deceit and self-centeredness! Jesus calls us to live not as if *our* feelings about what's right and wrong are the standard for our moral lives, but as if God is the standard.

And that brings us to the other answer, the second reason we should follow Jesus' way. We follow Jesus' way not simply because it works, because it's useful, but because that's how God is, how God acts toward us. God turns the other cheek when we lash out at him. God blesses us when we curse him. God gives to everyone who asks of him, expecting nothing in return. As Paul says directly in Romans, "God proves his love for us in that *while we still were sinners*, Christ died for us....While we still enemies. we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." God saw our plight, that we were stuck in a vicious cycle of hurt and retaliation, and took the initiative and he forgave us: *For* our sin and unbelief, God *gave* us good. And because God did that, so can we. Indeed, we show that we are "children of God" when we choose not to retaliate but to give good for evil.

"I want you to know preacher," a man in one of my early congregations said to me, "that if somebody comes by the church and needs a helping hand, you are to give them whatever financial help they need. I'll promise to give whatever is needed, with no expectation that they will ever pay back what they've been given."

"George, that's a generous offer for you to make," I said. "How kind you are!"

"Kindness has got nothing to do with it," George said. "When I was young, clueless, and didn't know which way to go, I was out of work, down and out and hungry for nearly a whole year. A number of folks had mercy on me, gave me the help I needed, and their help got me on my feet. I promised God that I would try to do to others what others had done for me. Those folks who helped me showed me what God means this world to look like." George wasn't being unrealistically generous and kind; he was living Jesus' words.

In another instance, a woman told me about her terrible experience of having her husband cheat on her, leaving her and the children in a horrible fix. I said to her, "It's amazing that you have not only survived but thrived after what he did to you."

"I couldn't have done it without God," she said. "The Lord enabled me to forgive Joe, to let go of my anger and move on."

"That's amazing," I said. "What an amazing spiritual achievement for you to forgive someone who had so wronged you. I don't think I'm a good enough person to do something that good," I confessed.

"Sure you could," she said. "He did it for you, after all." "He?" I asked.

"God," she said. "God found a way to forgive me, to let go of his anger at all the ways I had disappointed him over the years so that we could move on together. It's only right that I should try to act just a little bit like God had acted towards me, right?"

The thing that impresses me about Jesus' teaching here is that it is so simple. Sometimes we have Scripture that is very difficult to understand, that demands lots of interpretation and contextualization. What Jesus says here is simple, obvious, clear, and direct. Not easy, but straightforward. And if we doubted it, he demonstrated this way in his own life, suffering shame, torture and death. On the cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing. Father, *for* this evil, *give* them good. And he has, has reconciled us who pushed him away. This shows that Jesus' Sermon on the Plain here is no mere code of ethics but a revelation of God. God acted in the person of Jesus, in his turning the cheek, blessing his enemies and the like. And it is a promise that God is acting through us when we do these things too. Thanks be to God!