

Sermon

Epiphany 7C February 23, 2025

Luke 6:27-38

Today we get the second part of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain; which, again, isn't so much a sermon as it is a collection of sayings. And if you thought last week's blessings and woes were problematic, wait until we look at this one. Today Jesus says to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you, turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs, don't ask for your stolen goods to be returned, and do unto others as you would have them do to you. He wraps up by saying to be merciful, don't judge or condemn, and forgive.

Last week we had the reversals that God's kingdom will bring about: the poor will be lifted up, the hungry will be fed, the rich will be called to account, the full will experience hunger. As active followers of Christ, part of our job is to work for God's kingdom to be present on earth as it is in heaven, which will entail making some people uncomfortable and/or angry. But those were statements of God's reversal, and not behaviors.

Today we get behaviors, and these are much more difficult to follow. They are more difficult to follow for two reasons.

The first reason is that in reading through this list, it would seem that Jesus is telling us we shouldn't ever stand up for ourselves. It seems he is telling us to be doormats and let people walk all over us. That, of course, is one interpretation.

But another interpretation is that there is strength in non-violence. It takes a special kind of fortitude to not respond in kind when you are mistreated. One reason Branch Rickey selected Jackie Robinson to be the first black player in Major League Baseball was because he thought Jackie was strong enough to not retaliate.

The non-violent march in Selma protesting segregation, lack of voting rights, and mistreatment of blacks was met on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by state troopers wielding whips, nightsticks, and tear gas. The abuse inflicted by troopers on the peaceful protesters, and their non-violent response to being attacked, was captured on TV and became a major turning point in the Civil Rights Movement.

There's a group of so-called Christians (the WBC if anyone asks) who made a name for themselves by protesting against gay rights in a variety of locations and settings. I remember one story where they showed up to protest a church's pro-lgbtq stance and the ladies of the church met them outside at their rally with cookies and lemonade. That's some serious non-violent strength.

And Jesus himself was nailed to a cross in his final act of non-violence after being arrested, whipped, punched, and spit on.

Taking a non-violent stand as a response to violence against you, or in solidarity with those who suffer injustices, is not becoming a doormat, but is an exhibition of the strength of God. The question to ourselves, then, is, "How do we fight for the marginalized and the different with the calm, non-violent presence of Christ?"

The second reason these behaviors are hard to follow is because abusers, victimizers, villains, and violators are familiar with this passage. When they attack, one of their tactics is to say, "You have to take what I dish out, and you have to forgive me because Jesus said so."

In one respect, they are right in that Jesus calls us to forgive them. But we are not called to remain in a relationship or situation where we are constantly being abused or mistreated.

As we approach Lent, with its focus on penitence and forgiveness, we must remember that forgiveness isn't about the other person, it's about us. Forgiving another person for something they have done to us allows us to live our lives unburdened by what they have done. To put a popular spin on it, instead of someone living rent free in your head, you evict them. There's no retaliation. There's no revenge. There's no getting even. But there is forgiveness and an ability to move on.

That moving on includes moving on to an understanding that a non-violent response can include a period of separation or termination. An extreme example of this is that of an abused spouse. Separation and termination are needed for personal safety. Forgiveness is needed so she can stop allowing him to control her from afar, and maybe even so she can love again.

We are called to do good, pray, give, and follow the Golden Rule. We are called to do those things with the non-violent strength of Christ. We are called to do them in ways that bring attention to injustice and oppression without capitulation.

May we have the will to stand up to hatred and evil and the courage to do so with the calm strength of Christ.

Amen.