

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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... And For Those Still Listening

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The Gospel of Luke tells us that on the day of Jesus' death, about "noon darkness came over the whole land...and while the sun's light failed, Jesus breathed his last. When the centurion, saw this, he praised God and said, 'Certainly, this man was innocent.'" (Lk23:44-47)

If the Roman soldier who carried out Jesus' execution recognizes his innocence, why didn't he cry out for justice? Why didn't he or any of Jesus' loyalists muster the crowds of gentiles, Jews, Romans, and people of all economic and ethnic backgrounds whom he touched to rally together.

Why didn't Jesus' followers retaliate? Jesus' ministry tells us why.

His life, death, and resurrection present the clearest lens to see the world of God's unfathomable grace.

Today's lectionary reading returns us to Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke. Before continuing his seminal sermon, let's consider the overall context.

Theophilus, a name that means "lover of God," commissioned a writer to compose Luke's gospel sometime about fifty years *after* the death and resurrection of Jesus. The intended audience for this gospel includes all those whose lives were

upended by a peasant girl's illegitimate son whose only crime was to heal people and preach love.

Anyone who encounters this gospel already knows that his supporters betrayed and abandon him before he died on the cross. And they know the life-changing stories of those who witnessed the resurrected Christ, proving that God will not let violence have the final word.

The readers of this gospel come with a curiosity and are faced with a choice.

Do they return to the tit-for-tat ethos of life that also ranks people by what they possess and their capacity to dominate others? And, continue to seek revenge by perpetuating waves of violence?

That's the easy way people lived prior to Jesus.

Or, do they delve into the heart of his ministry so that God's grace continues to change the lives of all people? This later choice holds irresistible allure but comes with the warning. To opt for his path, marks them as an enemy to the status quo, just like Jesus.

It's a life and death decision. That's also our decision.

Now, let's go back to the story, to stand side-by-side with the disciples as Jesus speaks.

He's already called those who endure poverty and hunger "blessed" and warns the rich and those who are full. We can imagine the crowd is about to erupt into shouts of "go get them" but instead thins as some people just drift away.

To those still listening – meaning the disciples at the time of the sermon and those of us like Theophilus who want to know how Jesus changes the world – he describes radical, some would say nonsensical, teachings as the way to an abundance of grace.

Dear God,

We crave your words of grace. Silence the noise around and send your spirit among us. Startle us with the truth spoken by your son. Amen.

Luke 6:27-38

"But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat 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. Give to everyone

who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Jesus startles his listeners with, “love your enemies.” The word “enemy” jars us.

Whenever I hear enemy, I think of the member of a congregation I once served.

Bob lined a hallway that led to his office with photos taken over the decades of the various men who served as Secretary

of Defense, U.S. Presidents, and heads of state from around the globe and himself.

He'd built a sprawling multi-national corporation to supply weaponry to our country's military and allies. His success depended upon *knowing* the enemy – our enemies and the allies of those enemies.

The company had maintained a color palette of the nuanced hues of the color of sand from one desert to another so they could paint an armored vehicle for any place of conflict around the world. They understood the literacy or the armed forces and aptitude to use weapons in order to maximize the effectiveness of strikes. Bob made it his business, literally, *to know* the enemy. He took that same laser focus to know his competitors as he battled for contracts just as fiercely.

When you look for enemies, you find them everywhere. Such a perspective also prods you to consider who sees me as an enemy. How am I vulnerable?

My heart races remembering our conversations. Bob towered in statue. Argued to intimidate and possessed a deep intellect. He drilled me on tenants of faith just as rigorously as he would a divisional CFO forecasting quarterly profits.

Bob would demand, “how am I to *love* those...” fill in the blank of people who threaten to our national security and his fierce patriotism would explode. “How am I to *love*” again imagine all those who threatened our personal safety.

As much as he exploded, he also softened. Faith is one of the few aspects of his life that prompted humility. He craved that conversation just as much as discerning how to profit from knowing an enemy...because he understood the incalculable human cost of war today and for future generations.

That fortune he made for himself also enhanced the stock portfolios of the endowments and foundations, places where he contributed his money to build community.

That’s when we’d talk about what love looks like and what forgiveness feels like. He knew all the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as God’s plan to end the cycle of one enemy retaliating against another.

Grace changed everything for that Centurion and for those who encounter the risen Christ. Grace tells us that God sees us as broken as we are and loves us still. Grace invites us to see ourselves and to see one another with the eyes of God.

Grace changes everything.

This leads us to Jesus' conversation with his disciples on that dusty road in Galilee.

(Thank God for Theophilus and all those lovers of God who wanted to know the power of grace.)

When Jesus says, "love your enemies" and "expect nothing in return," he asks us to deny deeply rooted behaviors passed down from one generation to the next. He dismisses what is widely acceptable: "If you love those who love you, so what? Even sinners love those who love them".

Anyone can love someone who loves them. That's not love. Anyone can lend to someone from whom they expect repayment. That kind of lending is merely a transaction. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.

A closer look at such transaction-based behavior reveals the problem: in these scenarios, what you do dictates what I do. It's okay if all proceeds along as we each expect, but if either party falls short, then we feel justified to *even up* the stakes. If that does not work, we shortchange the next exchange until we seek revenge. That's how the spiral begins.

Finally, when we return hate with hate, hate spreads. Once hate inspires our actions, we could see anyone as an enemy, and everyone loses.¹

How we behave does not depend upon how the other person acts. We respond to one another with the eyes of God upon us and always in respect to God's will.

Jesus asks his disciples to follow along as he takes this roadside teaching into ordinary life. From this point forward in the Gospel of Luke, he moves through Galilee and the surrounding area to prove how grace – forgiveness – changes everything.

He ignores the class hierarchies and ethnic divisions. He heals the leper, forgives the sinners, and includes the gentiles. Those words roll off my tongue with age-old stories, but never take his healing for granted because it is hard for us to imagine doing the same today and yet we can.

His parables thrive in secular teachings for the grace of the Good Samaritan's charity – tending a nearly-dead man with cold cash and no chance of repayment. The Prodigal Son describes a wayward youth lured away to the good life,

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-627-38-3>

squanders everything, and is still welcomed home – even before he repents. In each of these encounters, Jesus breaks the cycle of tit-for-tat to maintain equilibrium or gain dominance. He refuses to retaliate.

He demonstrates God's generous grace.

Loving one's enemy does not mean acquiescing to the powers that be. It does not mean inaction in the face of injustice or a lack of protest.

We see this in the witness of Jesus himself. He did not shy away from calling out the hypocrisy of the authorities. He urged them to watch and listen. Repent and join with him.

Jesus spent the bulk of his ministry giving tangible examples to ethereal ideals of love for all people. And in the presence of Jesus' death, God does not inspire retaliation, God merely rolls back the stone and continues to startle us over and over again with a grace that invites life to continue, despite the worst we could do.

To love our enemies is not a call to grit our teeth and resolve to be nicer to those unkind to us. It means we get smarter about the tactics of love and the breadth of people who will collaborate with us. It is to follow the narrow and risky path,

trusting the grace that brought a church out of hiding and is the same grace that emboldens us to dissolve the hatred festering between us.

That's the decision the Centurion made centuries ago. He received God's grace and became an agent to spread it wider and wider. That's the decision before us as well.

We quite simply don't have the power to follow any gospel ideal—such as loving others, forgiving enemies, living simply and nonviolently, or humble use of power—except *in and through union with God. And, this my friends is offered to us all, enemy, ally, friend, and foe.*

We can never love our enemies without accepting the amazing grace of Christ's resurrection and the forgiveness given to each one of us. Grace changes everything.



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