

**“Love your Enemy”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – February 20, 2022**

**Please read:
Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Luke 6:27-38**

Today’s continuation of Jesus’ “sermon on the plain” Mary so eloquently reflected on last week, what I call *stuff I wish Jesus didn’t say!* It’s some of Jesus’ most famous and challenging teaching and is really the fine print on his call to “Pick up your cross and follow me.” It makes me think of Mark Twain, who said: it’s not the parts of the bible I *don’t* understand that trouble me, it’s the parts I *do*. I understand Jesus’ words: love your enemies, do no violence. Lend without return. Right, we get it. But *doing* these things now, especially when rumors of war are running high, and our own political climate is as divisive and uncivil as ever? Why would we even want to practice what Jesus teaches, even if we could?

Some theologians have said Jesus is raising up an impossibility. He is setting the bar so high as to make clear none of us can jump it; to show we are all sinners and drive us into the arms of grace. I disagree. Lots of people have practiced non-violence, *and it changed everything*. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a revolution by putting these words into practice. The Civil Rights Movement included training schools to learn non-violence and it changed our country and the world. King learned how from Gandhi, whose non-violence ended British colonial rule in India. For decades outsiders assumed there would be bloodshed before Apartheid was overthrown in South Africa. Then the African National Congress listened to Jesus’ words and ended apartheid with peaceful resistance. Folks sometimes dismiss Jesus as a starry-eyed dreamer, but no, these are pragmatic plans for a new reality. If you want to change the world, do what Jesus says and watch what happens!

It is a costly change. Dr. King was assassinated. So was Ghandi. Non-violent revolution is a dangerous business. Jesus taught this non-violent revolution and soon was he nailed to a Roman cross. Non-violence can change the world, but it is not safe. Try telling someone you’re a pacifist and the first thing you’ll find is they want to fight with you. It’s good practice, you’ll learn quickly peace isn’t easy.

My ancestors are Mennonite. They were thrown out of Switzerland because they refused to allow their sons to be used as mercenaries in the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. And so they lost land and fortune, and had to start all over again in this country, buying land from William Penn and farming around Lancaster, PA. The Amish are also pacifists, and many of you have seen over the years, they are serious about practicing these things we wish Jesus never said.

I once heard of a southern preacher who taught that God gives you what you want... *but only after God changes your want around*. Lots of versions of faith treat God like a vending machine, a butler whom we summon to do our will. And if I’m honest I do this too in my prayers. God can you do this? Fix that? But the more time you spend with God, the more your *wanter* gets changed around. You start praying for the things *God* wants. God, would you help the poor? Would you be with your suffering children in Yemen? In Afghanistan? God, would you make this whole creation the one you dream about? God would you show compassion and surround with love those who mourn and are in grief?

Our passage has another verse I'd ignored before, "Give to everyone who begs from you," Luke 6:30... If we gave to everyone who asks, we would all be broke! *Like Jesus*. But notice Jesus doesn't say *what* to give. You don't have to give what they ask for. In fact, friends who work in poverty relief say it's better to give to organizations that help the poor intelligently instead of change on the streets. But you can look poor *people* in the eye. Ask their name. Talk with and pray for them. Offer to eat a meal with them. Because that's our sister, our brother, in fact, to listen to Jesus, they're *him*, in distressing disguise.¹

God gives us what we want, after God changes our want around. Maybe that's the key to this whole teaching. If we pray to learn, we'll learn to pray for less stuff (like children writing a letter to Santa), a to be filled with more with the Spirit of God. And that's really our prayer for anyone, that they'd be filled with more of God too. Maybe that's really at the heart of what loving our enemies means.

So we can't say it's unrealistic to seek peace in the face of violence. There are plenty of examples where non-violence has *worked*— where hearts of the enemy have been changed... Gandhi's peaceful revolt against the English in India, civil rights marchers in America, the peaceful overthrow of apartheid.

One of my favorite stories is one you may not have heard about. It's about the French Protestants of *Le Chambon sur Lignon*. When the Nazis occupied France, most went along with their demands to give up their Jewish neighbors to the authorities. Some resisted violently, and heroically, and their memory is rightly celebrated. But some resisted *non-violently* like the residents of *Le Chambon*. A village of 5,000 French people sheltered 10,000 Jews, mostly children. This was to risk death or worse. But there was something in their memory of a time when *they* were persecuted for their Protestant faith. And they suffered again for resisting the Nazis. But they also saved thousands. When asked later why they'd been so heroic, they were confused. Wouldn't anyone do the same?

Folks often point out the problem of evil—why is there such evil in a world made by a good and powerful God. But there is also a problem of good. Why are there such eruptions of glory? And why do most people *want* more of those? That longing is a sign of the goodness of God.

The clearest example of non-violence and meekness we have is the one who preached our gospel text today. Jesus practices what he preaches. Love your enemies. Jesus does that: loving us, his enemies, even his betrayer, his deniers, his torturers, his executioners.

Jesus gives even Judas' his body and blood in his Last Supper, and Judas goes right out into the night and betrays Jesus. Well that didn't work out so well, did it? Neither did it work out with the other 11 who all would flee, deny, abandon. If you feel like the church isn't very faithful, we're in a lot of good company for a very, very long time.

¹ Dorothy Day's language.

Jesus loves us his enemies from the cross we all put him on. “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.” Jesus does that. When struck he doesn’t strike back. When he’s stripped of his cloak he hangs on the cross naked for us, exposed, vulnerable, stripped of any defense, *God at our mercy*. He commands us to do good not just to those who love, to give money not just to those who *can* repay. He commands it, just like he does it: Love your enemies, do good, give freely.

He heals Roman soldiers who occupy and abuse Israel. He eats with sinners, prostitutes, drug abusers, perverts, and *even* with religious leaders. Jesus singles out the person you like the least, trust the least, have the biggest grudge against, and says ah, good, I love that person. And you too. Now the two of you will dine together at my table. Do not judge, but forgive, he says. This is the Lord of the universe who will judge absolutely everyone one day. And he says all I am is mercy. Not just for you. But for the person to whom you deny mercy. Give, and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down shaken together running over in your lap. That’s how God gives to us. God makes creation, every atom in it, from Saturn’s rings to the Long Island Sound, from the squall snowstorm flakes to your eyelashes. And God gives even more: salvation, grace, forgiveness. And as if that weren’t enough God promises to redeem every particle. Everything good enough for God to have made in the first place, God will *remake* even more glorious. You’ll see. One day everyone will see.

That’s what God is like in Jesus. So God asks us to be like that too...

Steve Benko’s brief battle with cancer and surprising death has left a lot of people in shock and sadness, but I’ve also seen New Canaan, and you this church come alive with care and compassion for Sue and their family. As one of my Rotary friends puts it, everybody in New Canaan has a Steve story! On Thursday we will mourn his death, but we will also celebrate his life, and how people still see goodness and the value of commitment and self-giving love spent over decades of faithful service. People will take a pause from the debating and squabbling over the school mask policies, or the library, or affordable housing debates, and we will come together and remember a man who loved his neighbors, even his enemies, and gave his life to faithful service for us all.

You see, Jesus makes all things new. He just keeps coming to us. There he is again. Resurrected. Raised. Going ahead of us. Transforming people into his image whom we would never have expected. Our friend. Our neighbor. And yes, even our worst enemy. The person we’d never invite to a party. The person who hurt us, or who we hurt. Jesus is changing us *all* back into his image.

One final story... In 1983 the Assembly of the World Council of Churches was held in Vancouver, British Columbia. A resolution was brought to the floor calling for an end to the practice of apartheid in South Africa. Before a vote could be taken, a diminutive man wearing a magenta clerical shirt stepped quickly up to a floor microphone. Following protocol, he introduced himself. “My name is Desmond Tutu,” he said. He lauded the motion and thanked the resolutions committee for its work.

Then in a soft-spoken voice he said: “I have only one concern about the declaration. I note the absence of any expression of love for our white South African brothers and sisters, even those who support the existing unjust policy that’s so destructive to my people and our nation. We, of course, want change; indeed, we must have change. But we want our oppressors to know that though we oppose their policies, we wish them no ill. Fairness and just treatment for all people in South Africa is all that we want, and when this policy is eventually overturned, we want to work side by side with all South Africans toward peace and reconciliation in our nation.”

It was an electric moment. A hush fell over the assembly, and all sensed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Tutu moved that the resolution be sent back to committee for the inclusion of these sentiments, and the motion received *unanimous* approval.

Friends, we are called to love our enemies. As one Georgian farmer once prayed, “Lord, today we’ve heard your word. And we don’t like it.”² As hard as it is, we are now called not to mumble, “Amen,” but to go out there and wrestle with what it means to follow a God who has showed us the way of non-violence and self-giving love for all. Because, from the very beginning, and ultimately, you will find that all people, even your enemies, are your siblings, beloved children of God.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

² William Willimon, referenced, Feb. 13, 2022: <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9490/pulpit-reource-february-24-2019>