

Luke 6:27-49
 The Way of the Heart – Part 2
 7th Sunday after Epiphany ~ Sacrament of Baptism ~ Annual Meeting
 February 20, 2022
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction:

“But I declare to you who are still listening...” That is a wonderful alternative translation to v. 27 that Charlotte began our First Lesson with. The NRSV translates, “But I say to you that listen.” I guess even preacher Jesus faced the challenge of congregations with flagging attention—even *without* smartphones in the pockets of their robes. So many distractions, so little time: then and now.

We begin today right in the middle of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” as it is written in Luke 6:20 – 49. I wonder why he began this section addressing only those who were still listening. Perhaps he *knew* what he had just said was really hard to hear and understand. Nevertheless, he persisted explaining to them what he meant. How to live by, how to follow in his way, the way to the heart of God. He sums it up in v. 35: “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return,” *despairing of no one* (other ancient authorities include that phrase). Really Jesus? Despairing of no one?

You may have noticed that Jesus chose to hold forth this time far from any cliff they might try to hurl him off like they did in Luke 4. Jesus, being Jesus, could read the room, or the plain, as the case may be. Perhaps some had stopped listening because they were feeling an urge to run for the exits. So here he changes it up using a parable about blindness, a joke about the size of a foreign object in one’s eye, fruit trees, figs, grapes, and finally home construction. All metaphors to help them and us to see what he is talking about. To help them and us see how we might actually go beyond the minds we have. How to do the unimaginable.

Warning: If you *don’t* want to change, if you are perfectly satisfied with your life and the condition of our world, *don’t listen* as I read the words of Jesus’ sermon in Luke 6, verses 39-49.

Sermon:

True confession: I love Jesus. But I don’t always like him.ⁱ And I’m guessing you are here, you are listening, you are worshipping right now, because you love Jesus, too. But, honestly as much as we love Jesus, we don’t always like him. Sure, we all love the baby Jesus in the manger? And we love the grown-up Jesus who changes water into wine at the wedding in Cana. We marvel at the Jesus who multiplies loaves and stills the storm.

And when we have messed up big time, we run to the Jesus who is writing with his finger in the sand, as the crowd was getting ready to stone the woman caught in the act of adultery who says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," (John 8:7). We like and love that Jesus. Did you ever wonder what he was writing in the sand by the woman? I heard he wrote, "If this doesn't work, run!"... It did work, that day.

But honestly, who here on the ground really likes the "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" Jesus? For one, it seems like Jesus is telling us to do the impossible. And worse than that: we know these verses and others like them, have been wrongly weaponized to justify abusers and abusive acts. What is Jesus really saying to us here? Jesus is telling us the way to the heart of God is to become people who are able to extend mercy and grace as abundantly as God does. To be people who are able to go beyond the mind we have. To be people who reach past our defaults. To be people who are willing to be self-critical. Yes: being ready to take out the log from our own eye, again and again. To be a church that is always reforming.

That's why we are here today, that's what we just baptized Damian Johnathan into today. Together we can learn to imagine and to practice the mercy that Jesus is preaching here in this sermon. As unimaginable as it may seem. But God has called us out to be a church (*ekklesia*) in order to change, to grow, and to get a little bit closer to Jesus' vision for us, every day. Including the vision he sets forth in Luke 6.

Let's reach beyond our defaults by looking together at what Jesus preached about forgiveness to a crowd of listeners who were largely victims, not victimizers. That's right, our best scholarship suggests that Jesus' words were focused on giving agency to victims. He was teaching them a "third way." Jesus' way in which love, forgiveness, and generosity forge a path not even imagined possible. Jesus did *not* say, "forgive and forget." I'm sure you have heard this phrase before. "Come on, can't you just "forgive and forget? Just get over it." Many of us have been taught that is what Christians are supposed to do. We are taught the false truth that somehow forgiveness should end the conversation about the lingering pain and consequences of sins inflicted upon individuals, as well as groups of people for generations. "Forgive and forget" is a popular spiritual "half-truth" and not the gospel of Christ.

"If you are silent about your pain," said Zora Neale Hurston, "they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it." Honestly, Christians have used this very scripture in Luke 6 to advise people to be silent about their pain. Clergy and other Christian authority figures have wrongly used these words of Jesus to advise vulnerable people to stay in abusive

relationships and environments. I want you to hear me: That is *not* what Jesus is saying here. If you listen carefully, you will hear Jesus is not requiring silence on the part of the victim. Offering the other cheek is not passively ignoring what happened. It is actually an act of resistance in the face of injustice. I hear in this text today a call to resist injustice as best we can. Friends, forgiveness does not wipe out the painful past as if it never happened, rather forgiveness opens the possibility of a new and better future.

How do I know that Jesus is not telling us to ignore what happened before? If that was the way our faith rolls, we wouldn't have the cross front and center in our sanctuary and in our theology. The cross calls us to account. The cross calls us to remember the pain, the sacrifice of our Lord. Our wellspring of mercy and grace. On the day of his resurrection, when the risen Christ appeared to his scared disciples locked up in a room, he showed them his wounded hands. This is how they knew for sure it was Jesus.

Another default this text calls us to reach past is the popular half-truth: "Love the sinner, hate the sin." It gets quoted like scripture, except it is not. You will not find this phrase in our Bible. And too often this "love the sinner hate the sin" has hurt our LGBTQ siblings, all of whom were made beautifully and wonderfully in the image of God just as they are. Stepping back from that specific dismissive and discriminating use of "Love the sinner, hate the sin," the general idea of separating bad choices from the person making them or being swept up into them is helpful and true. I heard a helpful rephrasing I want to pass on to you today. I hope you will take this one with you wherever you go. Here it is: *Love all people, hate the injustice.*ⁱⁱ I believe that phrase rings with gospel-truth. We hear Jesus say it and do it. Again and again.

But Jesus, who does that, really? Nadine Collier did. Nadine is the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, she said those three words, "I forgive you," to Dylann Roof, the 21-year-old white supremacist who shot her mother and eight other African Americans during a Bible study on June 17, 2015, in Charleston, South Carolina at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. One of the oldest Black churches in the US, and a center of organizing civil rights events. She looked him in the eye at his bond hearing and said, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."ⁱⁱⁱ You can hear in her words: the honest pain and scarring were still there. And at the same time, she heartfully forgave him. That unimaginable act of forgiveness can only be powered by the Holy Spirit. And years of practice in a community of believers. A church that is being church.

There's a lot of hate out there. Living under the cloud of this pandemic now for nearly two years, we feel fresh storms of hate raining down on us. I received an email just this past week from a person whose job brings them up close to what is going on in around the schools. They wrote, "I am in in disbelief at the spread of hate I see. It's awful to say the least." Fights in schools between students are breaking out here and all over the country. Adults are on edge and ready to attack, if not with fists with words and memes. Friends, Jesus needs us to be the church, now more than ever.

Are we doing to others as we would have them do to us? When challenged by a defiant student who said to the Jewish sage, Rabbi Hillel, "I will convert if you can teach me the whole law while I stand on one foot." He answered with this: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary." The Torah was Jesus' law. Some say the whole New Testament is commentary. Jesus came to show us in human form what God's grace looks like and acts like.

Here's the good news: We have the agency to break the cycle of hate. We can be like the man who dug deeply and laid the foundation of his house on rock. Or we can proceed according to the gospel of revenge and retribution. But that is not what Jesus died for. That is not why God raised Jesus from the dead, so that we could keep operating in default. Never breaking the cycle that love and grace and forgiveness have the power to do. One small act of mercy, can break the cycle of revenge. Just as one aggressive counterpunch can escalate more quickly than we can say, "I'm sorry."

Look around this beautiful room. It probably looks like a sanctuary to you, because it is. But that is not all it is. We are also in a classroom, a laboratory, a surgical theater, a band room, a weight room, boot camp. Here in this place, Jesus is calling us to learn, to experiment, to heal, to rehearse, to team-build, and to strengthen our spiritual body in the art, the science, the practice of forgiveness. From within and without.

Are you still listening?

ⁱ T. Denise Anderson, "Making a Statement," *Vision*, Sojourners Magazine, Feb. 2022, p. 45.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/epiphany7c/#Luke6%3A27-38=>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/>