

What We Practice We Become

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Epiphany 7

February 23-24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

Last Sunday afternoon, about a thousand people gathered in front of the Henry Pratt building on Highland Ave in Aurora for a prayer vigil. We stood on the space that had been in the news since Friday afternoon. It was sleeting and cold, grey and somber. We stood on a level space.

Leaders spoke and prayers were offered. The persons whose lives were taken were remembered. We prayed for comfort and healing, peace and an end to such terrible violence. Because of the sleet, the candles would not stay lit, and printed sheets of readings would only get wet. So, a thousand people of various ages, from infants to the elderly, stood and listened. Our only line of response was *Amen*. Let it be so!

In this weekend's scripture, Jesus' sermon on a level place continues. Here, Jesus is speaking to those who are listening. To those who are paying attention.

In the Hebrew scriptures the *level* place was a place of suffering, death, violence, vengeance, mourning, disgrace and hunger. A *level place* was a place of human hardship. [1]

Jesus was not giving a political speech or making campaign promises. He was describing what it looks like to live in God's realm. He invited the listening people to share in God's dream of compassion that mends and heals.

The people who gathered to listen to Jesus had no lighted candles to hold, no words to read. It probably wasn't freezing and sleeting, but I bet most of the people knew what it felt like to be left out in the cold.

Jesus was *standing with* and *teaching for* those who lived in the level place of hardship: people oppressed and hungry, and wondering what difference their lives could make.

In many ways we are quite different from Jesus' first gathering. As middle-class people, we have enough food, plenty of coats, genuine friends. and warm homes.

Still, we have our own level places—places of suffering and loss, failure and pain. We have our own worries and anxieties. We have experienced brokenness and emptiness. We have our own wilderness times of grief and loneliness, anger and resentment. Sometimes we hold grudges close and tight like beloved blankies, thinking they will give us comfort and keep us safe.

Jesus' words on the level place were of comfort and challenge.

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you. Do not leave people out. Do not retaliate. Give what you have. Be generous, and don't expect to be repaid. In other words, do not imitate those who hurt you and oppress you.

He invited those who first listened to join the movement, to be compassionate as God is compassionate.

Dear friends, this is the only hope for humanity and for the world.

Jesus knew what modern research has revealed: Revenge does not work.

You've heard the saying, "I don't get mad, I get even." It is natural to feel this way, but revenge reduces us to our worst selves. It puts us on the same level with those spiteful people we claim to abhor. Revenge increases stress and impairs health and immunity. Revenge can make us sick! Or worse!

Confucius wrote, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." [2]

Frederick Buechner said about the same thing:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself.

The skeleton at the feast is you. [3]

To live in the realm of Shalom—divine desire for wellness for the world—we have to go a different way ... the way of wisdom.

Do not imitate those who hurt you. Instead, imitate God, who does not harm but heals. Jesus' invitation and inclusivity were intended for us all.

We gather here week after week. Like those who followed Jesus so long ago, we are among those who pay attention, who listen to what life in the Realm of God is like. We pray for and receive forgiveness, are freed to forgive others and to live life with courage. We are fed with the Bread of Life for the sake of our wellbeing and for the sake of world.

We become the Holy Community the world so badly needs.

Last week on NPR's "On Being," Krista Tippett interviewed neuroscientist Richard Davidson. Dr. Davidson studies qualities of character such as kindness and practical love, in lives and in the classroom. He thinks that this is going to be the next frontier for science. "The way I think about it is that love is a quality which obliterates certain kinds of boundaries." [4]

Dr. Davidson contributed to the discovery of the science of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the idea that our brains do not stop forming at age eighteen or twenty something, but that our brains form and can change over the lifespan. This is wonderful news!

He said that we can change our brains through our behavior. WHAT WE PRACTICE, WE BECOME.

The very mechanisms in the brain that allow adversity to get under the skin are also the mechanisms that enable awakening. In other words, things that anger, offend, hurt, and frighten us also trigger our minds and whole selves to *do something!*

Science shows what I think Jesus and the prophets already knew: We are hard wired for compassion. We come into the world with an innate propensity for compassion, but to be expressed it requires nurturing.

If we are in a context where people are doing kindness around us, we will osmotically absorb it, and it will be nurtured.

Kindness *pressed down, shaken together and running over* (Luke 6:38) is received as if in a huge pocket or absorbed like in a giant Bounty paper towel!

Some would imagine that soft qualities such as kindness, love, and compassion wouldn't serve us well in the world as it is. But the same things that threaten us create an opening for resilience.

Kindness does not mean approval but seeks the best interest of the other.

The neuroscientist said that teachers change brains.

Jesus was a teacher who stood on the level ground of human misery and possibility. Through his words and work, he modeled the compassion of God for all people.

As members of the Body of Christ we pay attention to his teachings, we embody them in our words and actions.

We are not diminished or depleted in our generosity and kindness.

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38). The images are wonderful. The language is lovely!

We can imagine the possibility of moving out of our ruts!

The level places of our lives—places of pain and loss, doubt and fear, anxiety and regret—require attention and renewal.

Michael Gerson is a writer for *The Washington Post*. Recently, Gerson was hospitalized for depression. Gerson is familiar with this *level place*. He wrote: “I think this medical condition works as a metaphor for the whole human condition.”

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All of us—whatever our natural serotonin level—look around us and see plenty of reason for doubt, anger, and sadness. A child dies, a woman is abused, a schoolyard becomes a killing field, a typhoon sweeps away the innocent. If we knew or felt the whole of human suffering, we would drown in despair ... The answer to the temptation of nihilism is not an argument ... it is the experience of transcendence we cannot explain, or explain away ...

Faith, thankfully, does not preclude doubt. It consists of staking your life on the rumor of grace ...

We sometimes search for the hidden door when the city has a hundred open gates. But there is a difference for a Christian believer: At the end of all of our striving and longing we find, not a force, but a face. All language about God is metaphorical. But the metaphor became flesh and dwelt among us ...

It is impossible ... to live always on [the] mountaintop ... there are people here today ... who are stalked by sadness, or stalked by cancer, or stalked by anger. We are afraid of the mortality that is knit into our bones. We experience unearned suffering, or give unreturned love, or cry useless tears. And many of us eventually grow weary of ourselves ...

[When] we hold to the wild hope of a living [and compassionate] God ...

we know that the appearance of the universe ruled by cruel chaos is a lie and that the cold void is actually a sheltering sky ...

we know that life is not a farce but a pilgrimage ...

we know that hope can grow within us—like a seed, like a child ...

we know that transcendence sparks and crackles around us—in a light, a voice, tears and a warmed heart—if we open ourselves to seeing it.

Fate may do what it wants. But this much is settled ... we know that love is at the heart of all things.

Many ... pray for strength they do not possess. But God's promise is somewhat different ... even when strength fails, there is perseverance. And even when perseverance fails there is hope. And even when hope fails, there is love. And love never fails. [5]

A good measure pressed down, shaken together and running over will be put into your lap.

What we practice we become.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Allen, Ronald J. "Luke 6:17-26 Commentary, workingpreacher.org, February 17, 2019.

[2] Confucius, as cited by Judith Orloff. *Emotional Freedom: Liberate Yourself from Negative Emotions and Transform Your Life*, Harmony, 2009.

[3] Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973, pg. 2.

[4] Davidson, Richard. "A Neuroscientist on Love and Learning," On Being with Krista Tippett, NPR, February 14, 2019. (A complete transcript of this program is available at <https://onbeing.org/programs/richard-davidson-a-neuroscientist-on-love-and-learning-feb2019/>)

[5] Gerson, Michael. "I was hospitalized for depression. Faith helped me remember how to live." *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2019. Adapted from a sermon delivered at Washington National Cathedral on February 17, 2019. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/02/18/i-was-hospitalized-depression-faith-helped-me-remember-how-live/?utm_term=.7d58d9264863)

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Reflection Questions

- What separates you from others? Do you identify any persons as enemies? What would it take for you to reconcile?
- After the recent deadly violence in Aurora, how is your sense of safety, security, and confidence in the goodness of people restored? Your hope in overflowing abundance renewed?
- Jesus told his careful listeners, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." How can you live in this healing realm?