

Warning: Infectious Waste

Luke 6: 27-38

World Communion Sunday
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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

When my car begins to make noises I've not heard before — whining or knocking — I take it in to have it checked by a mechanic. It might be the timing, or a fan belt, or the transmission. I have it adjusted. I know people who, when they feel achy and out of sorts, go to a chiropractor to get an “adjustment.” So when I start making whining noises, and clanking about, and causing pain to others, I know I'm out of adjustment.

Once a man made an appointment to see the doctor. After an examination, the doctor told the man that he had rabies. He had been bitten by a rabid animal and waited too long to go to the doctor. Now nothing could be done medically about his condition. After telling the man the bad news, the doctor left the room but he stopped back later to check on the patient and found him writing something on a piece of paper. “Are you writing a will?” The doctor asked. “No” said the man. “I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!”

Jesus knows that the ethic of retribution comes naturally to everybody. We grow up playing tit for tat. So Jesus invites us to play by the rules of another game. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” It doesn't come naturally.

It's an extremely challenging but perhaps timely word for a nation that is at odds with one another, and increasingly raising their voices across the aisle, in the US Congress and even in our churches on this World Communion Sunday. But there is another way, a better way.

Who are our enemies? A girl once wrote to her pastor: “Dear Pastor, I heard you say to love our enemies. I am only six and do not have any yet. I hope to have some when I'm seven. Love, Jennifer.”

I might feel that I don't have enemies. I love everybody and everybody loves me. Maybe so! But enemies could appear anywhere. In a family, a sister-in-law maybe, or a parent. Or it could be someone with whom you work, or maybe someone you're in competition with. Competitors often become enemies. Within a family, brothers compete, sisters compete, spouses compete. Even friends compete. Nothing wrong with that! But sometimes feelings get rubbed raw, and resentments build. Even if you try to do something good, you're going to make enemies. Generally I join in the game of tit for tat retribution. I try to retaliate. That's the name of the game.

The truth is, when we are motivated by anger, things rarely turn out well. Parents are cautioned never to spank a child in anger, partly to ensure that it is the child's best interests at stake. Benjamin Franklin said, "Whatever is begun in anger ends in shame." Mark Twain wrote, "Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." Jesus is obviously interested in how we handle the toxic stuff of life. What are you going to do when you long to get even with someone else? It can consume you! It is toxic, infectious waste that must be handled with caution.

Whether it's a sibling, a family member, an in-law, a colleague at work, someone in the church, a neighbor, an undocumented resident, a refugee, a Democrat or a Republican . . . whomever it is that you are nursing a grudge against this day, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder' . . . but I say to you if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Maybe if we took Jesus more seriously, we would have less anger and violence spilling over in our lives and cities. The solution is not out there but here within us. It begins in our own breasts, in the human heart.

This week David L. Brooks of *The New York Times*, called for a ". . . new environmental movement, a movement to police our civic environment that isn't polluted by a vague condition called, 'polarization.' It is polluted by the specific toxic emissions we all produce in our low moments. Those emissions have to be precisely identified, classified, called out, as shameful."

John Calvin, the great Reformed theologian of the Reformation period wrote, "Christian doctrine is not a matter of the tongue, but of life. It is not apprehended only by the intellect and memory, like other branches of learning, but is received only when it possesses the whole soul . . . it must be transferred into our hearts and pass into our conduct and thus transform us into itself."

Jesus provides a checklist of seven categories of enemy: those who hate you, curse you, abuse you, strike you, rob you, demand things from you, and steal from you. It's pretty hard to say we don't have enemies. If you have children you have people who fit these categories!

So what does it mean to love in the face of hatred and hostility? It certainly doesn't mean being a "doormat" and letting people walk all over you. The #MeToo movement has exposed something that should be stopped. And it doesn't mean conjuring up some warm feelings for people you may despise. It does mean, in the words of Sam Wells, ". . . carefully and doggedly, not passionately or sentimentally, following the words of Jesus and the actions he commends to us. Do good to those who hate you. Say by your actions, 'However much you hate me, I will never hate you.' Remember this will end. Don't let these people turn you into a monster. Repay evil with good. Bless those who hate you. Mind your speech. Try not to lose your temper. Think of those who are hating and hurting you, and see them as tiny children they once were, longing for trust and safety, and speak to them as if they were still those children. Pray for those who abuse you – God is always as much a part of any story . . .offer the other cheek. In other words, don't get into a fight, because then there will be no difference between you and them, but don't let those also who hate you think you can be intimidated by violence. Offering the other cheek, and saying 'I'm not going to accept that violence', trumps everything else. Don't withhold your shirt, in other words, surprise your enemy with generosity."¹

Jesus isn't suggesting that loving my enemies is a kind of insidious way to torture of them. He isn't advocating some "kill 'em with kindness" tactic. He's talking about an adjustment between where I am and the place where, by God's grace, Christ calls me to be. And life as it might be! We can choose not to retaliate. We can absorb some of the world's pain.

But some might ask, "Hasn't there been enough cheek turning? Jesus doesn't really want more losers does he? Hasn't there been enough abuse? Aren't the smart ones the people who finally wake up, buy a gun or a lawyer, and get even?" I don't really think Jesus has a stake in more victims. Jesus seems to be asking me to play by a different set of rules. Is this God's world or not? Is God really at work bringing good out of evil or not? Is the only success worth having success in cooperating with God or not? That's a different game. I choose to play by these different rules simply because they are God's rules.

¹ Wells, Sam "Love Your Enemies" Luke 6:20-31 (*Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2015*) p. 27-30

It's been a contentious week in our nation, but no more contentious than it was during the Civil War, when the nation voted to re-elect a controversial President Abraham Lincoln. On Saturday March 4, 1865 he delivered his second inaugural speech. In it he took up the language of faith rather than identity politics, or skin color, or ethnic heritage. There was much that divided the country and every family had been affected. Some families had even lost family members on both sides of the conflict — Union and Confederate. There was a lot of righteous and indignant anger, a toxic substance. And so, calling all Americans to their best selves, Lincoln concluded the second inaugural address this way, *“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”*

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . do unto others as you would have them do unto you!” What does that look like in real life? Like this: *“With malice towards none and charity for all . . . let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations wounds . . . to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”*

Today is World Communion Sunday. In 1936, a handful of Presbyterian ministers gathered together to discuss and pray about their concerns following one world war as the world drifted towards another one. Divisions within the Church limited any witness to the call to live in peace among the nations of the world. As the ministers talked and prayed, they discerned that the Lord's Supper, instituted by Jesus Christ with the disciples on the eve of his death, had power to unite all Christians everywhere. In receiving the bread and the cup, Christians of every ethnic group, nationality, and economic status, all languages, of all denominations and political affiliations, declare Christ the Lord of life, and become the body of Christ living in the world. Divisions melt away as we eat and drink as brothers and sisters to the Lordship of Christ. And so, the first World Communion Sunday was organized and celebrated when Christians everywhere proclaim together our unity in Christ at his Table.²

As in 1936, our world is still filled with divisions and tensions, and is still in need of a witness from God's people — that there is another way to live peacefully with one another rather than

² 2008 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) p. 281.

apart from, or against one another. When we eat and drink at the Lord's Table, we celebrate both our diversity and our unity; proclaiming together our witness to a world where it is possible to love your enemies. Jesus Christ is still our peace!

So today we celebrate unity in the midst of all of our diversity. We proclaim together God's saving power for a world divided. A chalice and plate on the table are from our own history and the Kirk of Scotland. Smelted in Scotland in 1796, they belonged to the Lady Loan Church, imprinted in 1836. They were used here first following a renovation of the sanctuary in the 1960's. Past and present, culture, nationality and language converge here to empower us for a future with new hope and realigned, readjusted relationships.

Where would this country be without its churches? Where would it be without these words that encourage us to restrain our desire for revenge and retaliation, and encourage us to love our enemies and seek justice for all? If you are concerned about the direction of our civic life, then invest in our churches' life. It is an investment in realignment and readjustment of the people who will enter our civic life. You have a chance in the next week to invest in the future, our future together. Get on board and help us make a difference. Help us be witness to a different way, a better way forward. Thanks be to God!