

Epiphany 7 (C)
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Text: Luke 6:27-38

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This morning we have some of Jesus' most challenging words to ponder: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." And I wonder if it would be helpful for us to imagine Jesus' teachings like a surgeon's scalpel. When bitterness and resentment and hate fester in our lives, they can destroy our peace of mind. They can poison our relationships and make us truly miserable. When used skillfully, Jesus' teaching can bring healing to our spirits and set us free. But when used carelessly, they can do more harm than good. They can cause more scarring, without any real healing; for example, some Christians have been guilty of telling an abused spouse to return to a situation of domestic violence and turn the other cheek. I'd like to speak a direct, pastoral word and say that is not OK. That is not a faithful use of scripture. If you are in an unsafe situation, or if you know someone who is in an abusive relationship, Jesus is not telling you to continue to put yourself in danger. Instead, you should make a plan to get out, get to a safe place. Our Bible reading this morning does not require you to stay. What I'd like to do this morning is sketch out how Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and love of enemies is an expression of his overall work of healing for the human family, and what that means for how we apply these words to our lives, to our conflicts and our wounds.

The first, most important thing to know is that Jesus wants to transform our lives and our relationships with the power of God's love. Where there is hurt or pain, where there is antagonism or estrangement, Jesus wants to bring healing. Specifically, Jesus wants to disrupt patterns of violence and victimization that destroy relationships and cause so much suffering. Living under Roman military occupation, Jesus knew plenty about violence and victimization. That was how Roman rule worked. Jesus also knew that the typical responses to violence, either passive, resentful compliance to actual or threatened violence, or violently striking back at the oppressor, they do nothing to change the fact that the relationship is defined by violence. Fighting back is still violence. It just makes the victim into the victimizer. Jesus invites the human family to try another way—creative non-violent resistance. We all know there are no guarantees in life, but creative non-violent resistance holds out the possibility of accomplishing what passive submission or fighting back can never do—and that is changing the relationship, changing the dehumanizing dynamic of the relationship.

Jesus' vision for transforming relationships is rooted in the conviction that God loves all of us—God loves me and my enemy, God loves you and your enemy. An enemy could be almost anyone—a neighbor with whom you're having a property dispute, a political

extremist, a bully at work or at school, a pushy family member. But God doesn't show favoritism. Instead, God sends rain on the just and unjust alike. God gives the sun to shine on the good and the bad. Paul the apostle says that Christ came to die for us while we were sinners—and even more, while we were enemies of God. It's not just that God's love is so expansive. It's also that there's less difference between us and our enemies than we might wish to believe. Jesus wants us to recognize what we and our enemies have in common. We are all loved by God, and we all share the same basic human needs and wants, the same basic human fears and longings. We may have different values, different goals, different life experiences, but at the most fundamental level, we are just like them. They are just like us. So Jesus invites us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.

This kind of love is built on two essential life practices—humility and compassion. Humility is an attitude or a commitment to not place myself above others, to not imagine myself as more important than others. It doesn't mean making myself less, or always putting my needs last. It's really just acknowledging that I am not the center of the universe. I am subject to all of the limits and frailties of being human. My wisdom and knowledge, my power, my abilities, my empathy and love—they are all limited, which means I don't have all the answers. And compassion is more than just a warm feeling toward others. Compassion is an attitude or a commitment to treat others as human beings whose lives really matter. Compassion treats others the way I would wish to be treated. That means acting as though I am no more entitled to get what I want than anyone else is. (See Timothy Miller, *How to Want What You Have*) Humility and compassion are what make human life and human community beautiful, and they make it possible for us to love our enemies.

It's important to know that loving our enemies and doing good to those who hate us doesn't mean pretending that what they say or do is OK. It doesn't mean agreeing with them or approving of their actions. Loving enemies or forgiving them doesn't mean you can't say "No" to them, or have a healthy sense of personal boundaries. You can say "No" to the bully or the pushy relative or the political extremist. So whether your conflict includes racism or domestic abuse or vandalism or anything else, loving your enemy does not exclude calling the police on them, or seeking justice or calling for accountability. Love for enemies does, however, mean that even while seeking accountability or justice, we recognize that person's humanity, see them as a human being—perhaps wounded or broken, but still human, not a monster. Loving enemies means refusing the attraction of retaliation or revenge. Loving enemies may look different depending on the power dynamics of the relationship. Loving enemies may open the door to reconciliation, but doesn't require it. And finally, loving enemies isn't just an internal attitude or feeling. It shows up in action, in how we treat our enemies.

This is such a challenging teaching. I came across a quote this week that made me laugh. It was about how the church, through its long history, has always seemed to hold Jesus' words about loving enemies at arm's length. The writer said, "It isn't that Jesus' teaching has been tried and found wanting. It's been found difficult and not tried." And that's a pretty good reflection of my experience of the church. I haven't experienced the church emphasizing Jesus' words about love of enemies, or defining love of enemies as essential element of Christian discipleship. It takes a significant level of commitment to put this into practice. And especially now, when there are so many dangerous forces in our society, I don't think I can say strongly enough that these hard words of Jesus are particularly important for our time.

I wonder what kind of motivation might speak to you, what would make you feel open to loving your enemy. Maybe you want to be free of the weight and burden of anger or resentment. Or maybe you deeply long for a relationship to be healed, or you know in your gut that continuing on a tit-for-tat trajectory won't ever take you any place you want to go. Maybe you trust Jesus to lead you to a truly beautiful and genuinely humane, genuinely loving and hopeful way of living. Maybe you've come to believe that creating the kind of society you want to live in has to include love of enemies. Maybe you recognize that this is how the reign of God manifests itself in our lives and our relationships. Whatever your motivation, I wonder how you feel about applying Jesus' wisdom to your life and your conflicts.

Perhaps you've heard of the butterfly effect. It's the idea that small changes in initial conditions can have huge effects later on. So, for example, a butterfly flapping its wings might create the small change in air movement that results in a tornado going that way instead of this way. Jesus is inviting us to be the butterfly with our acts of forgiveness, our humility and compassion, and especially our love for enemies. Who knows what those small change in conditions that we are able to effect might bring about for the whole human family. It might be like the little bit of yeast that ends up making the whole loaf rise. Or it might be like the little bit of salt that flavors the whole meal. There is certainly freedom and healing for us in following Jesus' way of forgiveness and love of enemies, but who knows what it might end up meaning for the freedom and healing of the whole human family! Thanks be to God. Amen.