February 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

Love Others

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 6:27-38 The Inclusive Bible

“To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well. Give to all who beg from you. When someone takes what is yours, don’t demand it back. Do to others what you would have them do to you. Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. If you do good only to those who do good to you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ do as much. If you lend to those you expect to repay you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to other ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. Love your enemies and do good to them. Lend without expecting repayment, and your reward will be great. You’ll rightly be called children of the Most High, since God is good even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate. Don’t judge and you won’t be judged. Don’t condemn and you won’t be condemned. Pardon, and you’ll be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you: a full measure – packed down, shaken together, and running over – will be poured into your lap. For the amount you measure out is the amount you’ll be given back.

 I feel like sometimes scripture needs a disclaimer and this is one of those scriptures. This scripture does not mean that it is okay to stay in an abusive relationship. This scripture does not mean that Jesus wants you to be a doormat. This scripture does not mean that it is okay to continue to be involved with someone who hurts you and harms you. This scripture has been used as justification for abusers and that is not okay. The first Methodist, John Wesley, had three general rules that he wanted Christians in community to live by. The first was to do no harm. The second is to do good and the third is to do whatever you can to draw closer to God. The way that we understand scripture should not do harm to people. Okay, disclaimer finished!

This past Monday I went to hear pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber speak about her new book, *Shameless*. Nadia is not what you think of as your typical pastor. She has a lot of tattoos and she cusses a lot. She recently celebrated 27 years of sobriety from drugs and alcohol. She shared about how she dabbles in compassion. This past summer she was asked to speak at a conference and they asked if she would also interview Lance Armstrong. She thought about it and decided that Lance Armstrong hadn’t done anything to hurt her. She said yes. Then, they asked her if she would interview previous White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer but she said that she didn’t even need to think about that. A strong refusal immediately came from her mouth. She said she was just dabbling in compassion, after all.

 She dabbles in compassion because of the effects that compassion has on her. Here she is preparing to interview Lance Armstrong and everyone is giving her advice. People are telling her to really stick it to him, don’t let him get away with what he has done, make him pay for his mistakes. On the day of the interview, she sits down with Lance Armstrong and she says, “I see from my notes you took drugs you weren’t supposed to and then you lied about it. Oh, my God, I did that so many times.” After the interview, Lance’s best friend came over to Nadia and said that it was the most open that she had ever seen Lance. There is a need in us to accuse and to confront, but compassion moves the needle for people to access themselves. Lance talked about being raised by a single, 16 year old mother. For his whole life, it had been Lance and his mom against the whole world, and he was going to do whatever it took to win. Dabbling in compassion.

 Have you ever heard of the term scapegoat? In the [Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible), a scapegoat is an animal which is ritually burdened with the sins of others, then driven away. The concept first appears in [Leviticus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Leviticus) where a goat is designated to be cast into the desert to carry away the sins of the community. It was an escape goat, a scapegoat. People would sacrifice a scapegoat by shifting the blame away from themselves and onto that person.

 We might hear Jesus’ words in Luke and think that following Jesus is all about living a moral life, where we respect others, mind our manners, and do to others what we would have them do to us. But loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you can only be done with God’s help. Forgiving someone who has hurt you can only be done with God’s help. God helps us to dabble in compassion. So, how do we start? We start by asking who are my present enemies. Then we pray for them because it is hard to hate anyone if you are praying for them. Think about why they are your enemy. Is it because you see them as a threat or are you jealous of them? Have they hurt you? Do you have a cultural or political difference with them? Then think about if there are steps that you can take to bridge the gap? Can you write them a note? Can you invite them for coffee?

There is an amazing TED talk by Özlem Cekic, who sits in the Danish parliament, and for the last eight years has had coffee and conversation with people who have sent her hate mail. It started because she was talking with one of her colleagues in parliament and he said that she should save the hateful emails. Her colleague said, “When something happens to you, it will give the police a lead.” When not if. A few days later she was at a friend’s house telling them the story and they said, “They would never attack a member of the Danish Parliament, and anyway, if they killed you, you would become a martyr. So it's pure win-win situation for you.” That didn’t sit well with Özlem.

She went home, turned on her computer and looked in her hate mail email folder. There were hundreds of them. She decided to contact the one who had sent her the most. She called him on the phone and said, Hello, my name is Özlem. You have sent me so many hate mails. You don't know me, I don't know you. I was wondering if I could come around and we can drink a coffee together and talk about it?” There was silence on the line. And then he said, “I have to ask my wife.” She thought, “The racist has a wife?” She has learned that she has to distance the hateful views that someone has from the person who is expressing those views. Özlem gives a challenge. She asks us to think about who we demonize, someone we disagree with politically or culturally or someone we don’t think we have anything in common with. Then we invite them to coffee. Don’t give up if the person refuses to meet. It has sometimes taken one year for Özlem to arrange coffee and conversation with someone. She says to acknowledge the other person’s courage. Then, she says to not judge during the conversation. In the conversation focus on what we have in common and bring food. Remember to finish the conversation in a positive way because we are going to meet again. We can’t build a bridge in one day.

She ends her TED talk by quoting her friend, Sergeot Uzan who lost his son, Dan, in a terror attack on a Jewish synagogue in Copenhagen in 2015. Sergio rejected any suggestion of revenge and instead said, “Evil can only be defeated by kindness between people. Kindness demands courage.” We have to be courageous.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 We are called to imitate the radical, all-encompassing love of Jesus. We don’t always succeed in answering that call. All of us fall short. But when we take some steps, we are on our way to coming very close to the heart of God. Having grace for ourselves means that we need to focus more on our responses than our reactions. Our reactions may never change. We are still going to want to punch people in the face. We cannot get a personality transplant, and even if we want to punch someone in the face, we don’t. Our responses change because of the grace of God.

None of us are here today because we really like the challenge of loving our enemy, but it is what Jesus demands. It is a call to swim upstream, to break conventions, to stand out in a crowd, to find fulfillment in going a second, third, and 77th mile. And it is hard. Too often we get involved in a church and we see that people are always going to be people and there is a huge difference between what people say they believe and what they actually do. As I was listening to Nadia Bolz-Weber speak on Monday night, she was a bit more colorful in her language than I am used to. It was hard for me not to get judge-y about her language! We were in a church and she is a pastor! She was definitely not raised in the south! But her message was important. I had to put my judgment aside and focus on listening.

Jesus’ words about loving your enemies are hard because they are against our inclinations, our desires, and our will, but they are also radical and powerful. If we love our enemy, we fear that we will let down our guard, and the enemy may win. If we love our enemy, that enemy may threaten the well-being of our community or our family. If we give our coat away, we might get cold. Who will give us a coat when we need it? If we lend money to someone who has no job and no prospect of paying us back, how will we support ourselves in our retirement? We have these competing values. We wonder if we turn our other cheek after being struck, how badly will we be wounded? Will the wound threaten those who depend on us? Will we lose our position in society because we are shamed? If I give my coat away, how can I pass it on to my child who may be cold? Jesus asks us to give without expectation of any reward in return. How does that work? It starts with dabbling in compassion. It starts with seeing and listening to those who are different than us. It means listening to those who voted on the other side. When we hear and see, understanding and compassion come to us.

We have a tendency and a temptation to think that if we love that person that drives us crazy, then Jesus will love us more. We will have a great reward, Jesus said that after all! God loves us all, even our enemy, not because of what any one of us have done, achieved, or claimed, but because of who God is.[[2]](#footnote-2) If we want to live as Jesus wants us to live, if we want to be as Jesus wants us to be, then we have to open ourselves up to dabble in compassion. We have to open ourselves up to the grace and transformation that Jesus gives us. We will never love our enemies without an amazing grace that transforms us and makes us different than we are. We must have God’s help to achieve this. And practice will make us better.

A life of following Jesus is about sharing unconditional, unlimited love with other people. We love others like Jesus loved, loving all people regardless of if they deserve it or not. Those who do us wrong, those who curse us, those who do us damage, we are called to love those people too. That is how a follower of Christ loves. Nadia Bolz-Weber shared her image of compassion. She imagines that God’s heart is right behind her heart. She imagines that God’s heart goes through her heart. That image helps her remember that our resources are limited, but God’s are not. We cannot do this alone.

Jesus speaks and creates a new, unsettling, upsetting world order. We live in a world where the bully always seems to win. Jesus wants us to imbalance the enemy with love, shame the law that oppresses, turn the cheek as an equal to our master. This is a hard path and we are going to stumble. We need patience and endurance for this journey, but Jesus can work within us to become a people of love and grace and forgive others.

At this very moment a special called General Conference is happening in the United Methodist Church with 864 elected delegates from all over the world meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. Pastors Rudy Rasmus and Vance Ross said that it is a meeting about property, proceeds, and power with human sexuality as a smokescreen.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is also a meeting to see if we are willing to share a denomination with Christians who think differently than we do. Are we able to dabble in compassion with those who do not agree with us?

The word religion at its root means to rebind. It is related to the word ligament. Religion is about being rebound to a group of people in a new community. We are intertwined, we are bound together. People are more than the mistakes that they have made. But, here’s the rub. Often in our lives, we have to deal with the past to move forward. We have to forgive so that we can move on. We don’t have to say that what someone did is okay, but we can recognize their humanity. One of my friends has started something new. When she finds herself complaining about someone, she says, “And God loves him too.” God loves her enemy just as much as God loves her. God loves our enemies just as much as God loves us.

The power of forgiveness lies in responding to the wrong that someone has done in a firm, clear way, while also treating someone as the beloved child of God that they are. Forgiveness is the only way to heal ourselves and to be free from the past because without forgiveness we remain tethered to the person who harmed us.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Desmond Tutu’s book about forgiveness, he says we must forgive or we will do harm to ourselves. Forgiving others is a path to healing our pain.

No one in this world was born to be cruel or to harm others. We can be angry at someone’s ignorance or their narrow-mindedness, and we can feel sorry for our enemies. We can dabble in compassion. We have a choice whether we want to live in the cycle of revenge or in the cycle of forgiveness. We experience forgiveness from God, so we are called to give forgiveness to others. We experience peace from God, so we are called to give peace to others. We experience hope from God, so we are called to give hope to others. We experience love from God, so we are called to give love to others. That is transformation. It is Jesus’ vision of what is possible. May we all do good to those that hate us; lend and expect nothing in return; don’t condemn and we won’t be condemned.

The way of Jesus is loving especially when we don’t want to love. It is loving those difficult to love and it is a loving that glorifies God. May all of us in this community of faith grow in grace and truth. May we be a home for those who feel broken by the Christian Church. May we be a different kind of church. May we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. May we see all the people, with their differences and their passions. The way of love, the gospel, is at the heart of our mission in the world. Let us dabble in compassion as we go about our lives. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. https://www.ted.com/talks/ozlem\_cekic\_why\_i\_have\_coffee\_with\_people\_who\_send\_me\_hate\_mail/transcript [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Crowe-Tipton, Vaughn. Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1. P. 385. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.gcorr.org/video/remembering-our-priorities-making-disciples-transforming-lives-session-10/?fbclid=IwAR14oTZO9x0CHG4rqxidpnht0jrkCClRF1ZVM8hsPdfuXqXSQWrPK5feFTA [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Archbishop Desmond Tutu in *The Book of Joy*. Pg. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)