

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 6:27-36, “The Basic Tension”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/9/2025

Well, it's Super Bowl Sunday. Who you got winning today?

Before the game, the Philadelphia Eagles or KC Chiefs players might say

“We all we got, we all we need.” (It's a football thing.)

But even ordinary folks make statements underlining our love

for those who are near to us:

“Ultimately, I have to do what's best for my family.”

“This is about taking care of the people I love.”

“You know, what's most important is making sure

I support my friends and neighbors.”

“I've got your back if you've got mine.”

These all come from a basic value of caring for people who are near to us,
which is very good and even necessary for our survival.

Supporting each other, caring for people in our community –
we can't take this for granted.

Jesus knows about these values, and he's not against them.

But Jesus knows that God's love goes beyond our typical ways of love.

God's love extends to those who stand against the Kingdom of Heaven.

God's love reached to us, *even when we were God's enemies.*

And so in this teaching, Jesus introduces a basic tension:

Will we only love our people, like all sinful human beings do.

Or will we accept the arrival of God's Kingdom into our lives
which produces the miracle of loving our enemies?

This is the second week looking at Jesus' “Sermon on the Plain,” in Luke chapter 6
which will continue for yet two more weeks.

Jesus began his sermon with poetic and prophetic blessings and woes.

These revealed how certain qualities emerge among people
who are encountering the arrival of God's kingdom
in their lives and in the world.

People in touch with God's kingdom which arrives through Jesus
are blessed *even though* they seem poor, hungry, sorrowful, and persecuted.

They experience this *because* they are entering a space
in which God's love and life become the primary focus,
but God's way is in conflict with the way of the world.

By contrast, those who seek to maintain control of their lives and the world
experience power, riches, and laughter.

They are big shots now, but woe to them,
for they are left disconnected from what God is up to,
and they will ultimately be left with nothing.

"Aha!" We say. "We knew it. We knew those bad,
powerful people were going to get it. Woe to you! Hahaha, woe, woe, woe!"

Hey, woah, woah, woah!

That's not exactly where Jesus is going with this one.

After the woes, Jesus says, in the passage we read today,
that those of us who are really listening
to the blessings and the woes will go on to *love our enemies*.

I have to be honest, I think this is the hardest thing Jesus ever says.

Taking up your cross and following him is unbelievably difficult.
But loving the people who nailed you to it? That's impossible.

Now, some folks have a hard time with this category, "enemies."

We're taught by movies and books that enemies are those who have it out for us,
who want to kill us or take our money or ruin our family.

But I'm not sure that is the most helpful way
of understanding an enemy.

Enemies are not limited to those who wish to do physical harm to you.

In fact, your enemies might not even know who you are.

What if an enemy were anyone that gets in the way of your goals in life?

Anyone who undercuts what you see as good in the world?

An organization, group, or system that you wish you could be rid of?

Think about:

- family members who hold grudges, critique your decisions...
- the person who always exaggerates what they've done and wants the attention to be on their accomplishments while ignoring yours...
- the needy person who constantly demands your attention, talks too much, and wears you out...
- the government that ... well, I'm just going to let you fill in the blanks here!
- people who are biased against you, your community, or people you care about...
- the health insurance system...enough said?
- companies who make money off of disposable plastic rather than reusable materials...
- companies who reshape our brains to desire their products with no regard for our wellbeing...

If you would like to just be able to step over these people

and live your life without regard to them and their complications,

I'd say they are your enemy for the purposes of Jesus' instruction.

Naming our enemies up front is an important task for hearing what Jesus says here,

so I want you to think of a particular person, group, or organization

you wish you didn't have to deal with,

and just admit to God that they are your enemy.

Be really honest about it.

(I promise you that God won't be upset.

It's not a secret to God who your enemies are.)

The actions of enemies are listed out in vv. 27-28:
they hate, they curse, they mistreat.

The response that Jesus encourages is both emotional, spiritual, and practical:
his followers should love, bless, do good, and pray for these enemies.

When we even *attempt* to love, bless, do good, and pray for our enemies,
our hearts become engaged.

We see our enemies as children of God who are lost.

We see weak and wounded people who lash out
because they are caught in a trap.

Our *hearts* begin to beat in tandem with the heart of God –
the God who does good to us even when we are in the wrong.

The practice of loving enemies begins as an exercise in the heart,
but it leads to practical acts of love.

Practical acts of love? One problem people have with Jesus' teaching
is that it sounds totally *impractical*, naïve,
or even something that opens the door for abusers
to justify their abuse.

Some historical background helps us see that while Jesus' teaching
does seem impossible for ordinary humans to do,
it was not impractical, naïve, or enabling.

You see, there was a group called the Romans who occupied Israel
and oppressed the people who Jesus was talking to.
They would have been on the list of enemies for Jesus' audience.

In a confrontation or disagreement, Roman military were allowed to slap people,
but if the person who was struck retaliated,
the punishment for them was disproportionately severe.

The scholar Ronald Rolheiser explains that because the left hand was unclean in ancient times (for personal hygiene reasons), a soldier would slap with their right hand.

Now an open-handed slap was used for people of equal status.

But a back-handed slap was *“intended for much more than simply inflicting physical pain.*

It was an act that asserted superiority, power over another, lording it over, arrogance.

Masters slapped their slaves in this fashion.

To hit someone with the back of your right hand made a statement:

“I am your superior! How dare you stand up to me in any way!

This is the order of things! Know your place and stay there!”

So picture the scenario: Someone is standing in arrogance, facing the person he is about to hit.

He strikes with the back of his right hand

and thus the slap falls on the right cheek of the other.

Now, if that other person turns their face so as to offer her left cheek, the attacker can no longer hit them in the same way.”

By turning the other cheek, the person being struck has not retaliated a blow for a blow. They aren't fighting on the enemy's terms.

But they have asserted their equality as a person.

They have put the soldier or master... the enemy, in a bind that invites them to accept their mutual humanity.

And that is love. Calling your enemy's attention to your common humanity as one who follows Christ in love.

Loving someone who hits you will not likely

be an emotional feeling of warmth and appreciation.

I think it would need to be free of disdain, rage, or malice in our hearts.

In keeping with the beatitudes, these responses may lead us to feel

sorrowful, heartbroken, and meek – *but they lead toward joy and freedom.*

When we see Black civil rights protestors in previous generations
standing against water cannons and dogs,
when we see protestors today enduring tear gas but not fighting back,
when we see people arrested
for preventing the destruction of the environment,
we see people turning the other cheek.
We see people who are loving their enemies.

“If someone takes your coat (cloak), do not withhold your shirt (tunic) from them.”

Scholar Walter Wink explains that taking someone’s tunic would happen
in a court of law. When a poor person could not pay their debt,
a court could allow the debt collector to take this poor person’s
outer cloak, which also functioned as a bed-roll.

But Jesus says they should not stop there, but should also give them their tunic.

Why? In his book “The Third Way,” Wink writes that

*This would mean stripping off all their clothing
and marching out of court stark naked!*

*Nakedness was taboo in Judaism, and shame fell less on the naked party
than on the person viewing or causing the nakedness (Gen. 9:20-27).*

By stripping, the debtor has brought shame on the creditor.

Imagine the guffaws this saying must have evoked.

*There stands the creditor, covered with shame,
the poor debtor’s outer garment in the one hand,
his undergarment in the other.*

The tables have suddenly been turned on the creditor.

*The debtor had no hope of winning the case;
the law was entirely in the creditor’s favor.*

But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him.

*He has risen above shame. At the same time,
he has registered a stunning protest against the system that created his debt.
He has said in effect, “You want my robe? Here, take everything!
Now you’ve got all I have except my body.
Is that what you’ll take next?”*

This, too, is a loving response to an enemy who has power over you.

It is not naïve. It is not enabling evil. It respects the humanity of all people.

It does not resort to fighting an enemy on their own terms.

And it comes from a prayerful heart seeking the way of Christ.

When we protest an unjust system in a way that unmasks its cruelty,
we are loving our enemies.

There's more that could be said about "giving to anyone who asks."

I won't go into detail, but the gist is that in the Roman patronage system,
every gift had strings attached.

Jesus suggested giving *without strings attached*, which would upend
the patronage system and the power it conferred to the elite.

[PAUSE] There's one final practical rationale behind loving our enemies.

When we have an enemy that we resent or seek to tear down and punish,
they have power over us. We are hooked to them,
and they show up in our thoughts at night.

But when we open ourselves to the Spirit of Jesus and ask for help,
and do something to love our enemies, something shifts in our relationship.

Wendell Berry explores this in his poem, "Enemy"

Enemies

By Wendell Berry

If you are not to become a monster,
you must care what they think.
If you care what they think,

how will you not hate them,
and so become a monster
of the opposite kind? From where then

is love to come—love for your enemy
that is the way of liberty?
From forgiveness. Forgiven, they go

free of you, and you of them;
they are to you as sunlight
on a green branch. You must not

think of them again, except
as monsters like yourself,
pitiable because unforgiving.

...

Think again of the person, group, or organization who you identified as an enemy.

Do you want to remain hooked to your enemy?

Do you want to slowly become, as Wendell Berry puts it,
a monster of the opposite kind?

This isn't the way of Jesus.

The Spirit of God is inviting you to respond in love.

Not to be dehumanized, not to enable abuse,

but to respond in love as a human made in God's image.

To forgive as you have been forgiven.

Let us take a moment to be honest with God about our struggle in these things.

Let's pray for our enemies now.

Let's ask to be released of resentment and rage.

Let's invite the way of Jesus
to break into our hearts and our world.