



Roanoke, Virginia

February 20, 2022

“Merciful Love”

Luke 6:27-36

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²⁷ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

We are going to do something a little different right now. I am going to ask that you respond out loud...yep out loud...yep in church... I am giving you permission. I am going to put an Emoji on the screen, and I want you to say out loud what you think the emoji is saying. And for those at home, you can actually scream as loud as you want to (as long as your parents are ok with it), here in the sanctuary, maybe we use your louder inside voice.

Are you ready?



Here is the first image:



Second image:



Third image:



Fourth image:



Fifth image:



The word emoji is from the Japanese “E” meaning picture, and “moji” meaning character. Emojis are pictographs that were created to enhance communication and language in the ever-changing technology sphere, where body language and verbal tone are absent. And year after year, and update after update, there are new additions. New additions to the emoji family are decided upon by the Unicode Consortium Emoji Subcommittee. They often solicit proposals from the public.

One effort to promote a new emoji idea began in Finland back in 2019. “In our modern digital communication culture, emojis are an essential way of expressing human feelings beyond words... We were surprised to realize there are dozens of cats and even two designs of zombies, but there isn’t an emoji for forgiveness,” said Tuomo Pesonen, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, who came up with the idea for the #forgivemoji campaign. This campaign strove to promote a message of peace and mutual understanding across the world by providing an emoji to depict and communicate the idea of peace and forgiveness.¹

To err is human, it is said, to forgive is divine. Maybe soon we can have this divine ability to communicate forgiveness through an emoji.

What would an emoji for forgiveness look like? Perhaps an olive branch? Perhaps hands of different colors shaking in the foreground of a heart? Perhaps a hug? Maybe a heart with a band-aid over top of it? Or maybe a hand offering a heart?²

¹ Busby, Mattha. The Guardian: “Campaign group in Finland crowdsource for 'forgiveness' emoji” Sep. 23, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/23/campaign-group-in-finland-crowdsource-for-forgiveness-emoji>

² These various options for “forgiveness” were the emoji ideas proposed by the #forgivemoji campaign found on the website – <https://forgivemoji.com/>



What would a mercy emoji look like? I wonder what emoji could be used to convey blessing? We have emojis for love: hearts of many colors, faces with hearts eyes—as we saw earlier—or heart bubbles, cat with heart eyes, even a heart gift wrapped. But how far can love emojis take us?

Jesus doesn't simply say love. Jesus says, "love your enemy."

Standing on a level place, surrounded by a crowd gathered from various locations, Jesus turns to the disciples and begins his sermon. Jesus starts his sermon by claiming a blessed reversal of fortune of those who listen: blessed are you who are poor, the kingdom of God belongs to you; blessed are the hungry, you will be satisfied; blessed are mourners, you will laugh once again; blessed are the hated and excluded, you will find joy in heaven. The least are the ones who are blessed in God's realm. What would a blessing emoji look like in this context?

And then Jesus continues to call to those who are the oppressors, the rich, the well-feed, the laughing and the prideful, the fortune you think you have is temporary. Here is a reversal of circumstance that comes with God's in-breaking mission on this earth.

A reversal of circumstance results in a reversal of response. How are those who are blessed to act toward those around them? How are those who have been beaten, starved, and pushed away, how are they to act toward their oppressors? Jesus says love them. No matter who they are Jesus says love them. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

A reversal of response.

And both Matthew and Luke in each of their versions of the sermon have Jesus saying the same phrase – Love your enemy. But Matthew's Jesus closes this section focusing on the divine "perfection" we are emulating. Luke calls us to be "merciful, just as God is merciful."

Mercy is the heartbeat that makes love revolutionary. Revolutionary Love is the choice to labor for others, for our opponents, and for ourselves. Our choice to embody Revolutionary Love is sweet labor—fierce, bloody, and imperfect. This is the call of civil rights activist, lawyer, and initiator of change Valarie Kaur. You may know who she is through her wildly viral TED Talk.³ There she tells of a story that was her awakening and ignited her mission for revolutionary love.

Valarie was a college student, watching the twin towers fall, the horror stuck in her throat, and a face flashes across the screen. A brown man in a turban and beard, and she realized that the nation's new enemy looked like her grandfather. The first person killed in a hate crime following the events of 9/11 was a family friend. He was a turbaned Sikh man she called "Uncle," killed by a man who called himself "patriot." Following the events of 9/11 people of color were targets in thousands of hate crimes that went widely unreported, and

³ This is from a TED Talk titled "3 Lessons of revolutionary love in a time of rage" from October, 2017.



her Uncle, Balbir Sing Sodhi, was the first. She grabbed her camera, raced to Balbir's widow, Guginter Kaur, "What do you want to say to the American people?" Ready to let the world hear and see the trauma and pain of a grieving widow, anticipating blame, hoping for a call to action, all Guginter Kaur said was "Thank You. Tell them Thank you."

Thousands of people and neighbors gathered in support at Balbir's memorial service. Guginter said, "They didn't know me, but they wept with me."

This was Valarie's first lesson in revolutionary love.

Continuing with Valarie's story:

Years later, they called Balbir's murderer in prison. It took 15 years, but they made that call.

With hearts beating and every emotion coming to the surface as Frank Rogue's voice came through the phone, it becomes an act of will to move towards a man they were supposed to hate. Valarie asks, "Why? Why did you agree to speak with us?"

Frank says, "I'm sorry for what happened, but I'm also sorry for all the people killed on 9/11." He fails to take responsibility. Valarie says she becomes angry but Rana, Balbir's brother still moves toward Frank with love, curiosity, and mercy -- listening -- and then responds.

"Frank, this is the first time I'm hearing you say that you feel sorry."

And Frank says, "Yes. I am sorry for what I did to your brother. One day when I go to heaven to be judged by God, I will ask to see your brother. And I will hug him. And I will ask him for forgiveness."

And Rana says ... "We already forgave you."

A reversal of response. A reversal of responding the way the world gives you permission to act.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Praying is not an abstract gesture. Lending is no longer irrational. The call to love our enemies is not a passive or submissive stance. It takes courage. Moving toward a person in mercy is the first step to love that is revolutionary. It is a choice. A difficult choice, but one that embodies the now and not-yet reality of God's beloved community.



Valerie Kaur reframes the idea of love of enemy to love of opponent. She says, “The word enemy implies permanence, but opponent is fluid.” Opponent is everchanging and can include, at times, even those closest to us.⁴

Why this broad understanding? Because there is a wound between opponents, and by processing the pain of that wound safely and by listening to how and why that wound happened, we can, together, begin to heal that wound by reimagining opponents as opportunities for greater understanding—greater understanding of who they are, who I am, and who we are together in relationship. And I believe this wound-healing begins right where our passage ends, with mercy.

Mercy is not a top-down, one way street from superior to subordinate. Luke’s Jesus preaches on the level place and calls us to acts of merciful love. Mercy is the leveler. And Love is the grounding.

Mercy is empathy in the face of enmity. Mercy is love pierced to the heart by the plight of another. Mercy is love that walks toward the stranger. Mercy is love that moves beyond the artificial lines drawn by history, society, and our own biases, whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor.

Merciful Love is determined by the Great Giver of Love. We are simply conduits of merciful love seeking to heal the wounds of the world, one choice at a time, one interaction at a time. Merciful Love holds nothing back from embracing our own brokenness as we seek to heal our wounds together and to affirm each other’s innate belovedness as children of God.

Perhaps the mercy emoji is a hand extending the heart—give and expect nothing in return. Here, here is my heart, let me give you this piece of me.

“Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as God the Father is merciful.”

Amen.

⁴ From Valerie Kaur’s website in the *Learning Hub* on the “Revolutionary Love Compass: Love for Opponents.” <https://valariekaur.com/learninghub/an-introduction-to-the-compass/>

