



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Love as an Action Verb”

Luke 6:27-38

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Introduction:

Our scripture reading comes from the NT Gospel of Luke. Jesus is preaching what's come to be known as his Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew's version, it's a Sermon on the Mount. In Luke, it's, literally translated, a sermon on the “level place.” In this section, he delivers a message to a large crowd, contrasting the values of God's Kingdom with the values of the world.

Luke 6:27-38. 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.



³⁷ ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

Commentaries call our passage the “sermon on the plain.” One pastor I read calls it, “the sermon I don’t want to preach.”ⁱ

I can’t blame him. It is intimidating to preach on love and forgiveness, particularly when they are some of the hardest disciplines to practice.

I chose Luke 6 for my sermon because it happens to be the lectionary passage for today, and after our umpteenth snow day with no school, I, quite frankly, didn’t have the time to think of anything else before the bulletin deadline. So, without doing myself any favors, I am preaching about love of enemies and the radical forgiveness at the heart of the Gospel in the midst of a political climate and news cycle full of hate and division.

When our daughter was younger, she had a children’s book called *Do Unto Otters*. It was about a family of otters that moved in next door to a rabbit, and the rabbit wasn’t sure how to treat his new neighbors who were so different from him. The book was full of cute and funny ways to be a good neighbor and be polite, to “do unto otters as you would want otters to do unto you.” The rhyming life advice book for preschoolers was fun and cheerful. . . . But when we grow up, we realize “do unto otters,” to do unto others, is easier said than done.

Jesus’ sermon on the plain likely sounds about as absurd to us now as it did to people back then. “Love your enemies.” How can one love those whom, by definition, one hates? The primary meaning of the Greek word for “enemy” means, literally, “to hate.” And Jesus’ original audience knew exactly who their enemies were. They were real and numerous and very close at hand.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Scriptures his contemporaries would have, of course, known, it is God who does the forgiving. Jesus is commanding his closest friends and the gathered crowd to love those they hate, to forgive as only God can forgive. His words are a paradox. To have heard this preached for the first time must have been baffling. Jesus is taking the world as they know it, and turning it on end. In Luke 5, the Pharisees had just asked Jesus, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (v21). Here, an individual, by his own authority, is offering and preaching forgiveness of sin. Jesus transforms what love and forgiveness mean, and radically preaches that we are expected to love and forgive like this.



It's baffling still, is it not? I know friends and family who have held onto grudges long after they should. And I've also known friends and family who have been hurt and wronged so deeply that if I were in their shoes, I don't know how I would begin to forgive and love again.

We have to be careful when interpreting this word. Without looking deeper, this command could be used in abusive ways—it *has* been used in abusive ways. For instance, what does it mean to preach “love of enemies” and “forgiving as we are forgiven” in a world where women and children are beaten in their own homes? What does it mean to preach this gospel in the church when so often these words have been abused by pastors and leaders to force women to swallow their own justified rage and sent back to *love* the very ones who place their lives in danger?ⁱⁱ

What does it mean to preach love and forgiveness in a country where hate groups are on the rise, and every day citizens grow bolder with the language of prejudice and violence? When leaders don't feel the need to repent or face justice for crimes committed, and we are expected to get over it and get on with our lives?

While our culture and the church often equate forgiving and forgetting, let bygones be bygones, that's not the kind of love and forgiveness Jesus is talking about in the Gospel. There is too much in Scripture that speaks of God's own outrage against injustice and the cheapening of human life.

Indeed, if you read along with me in Luke 6, you may have noticed that this passage about loving enemies is immediately preceded by what's called Jesus' “blessings and woes.”

²² *Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

²¹ *Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²² *Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ...*

²⁴ *But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

²⁵ *Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*



*Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

Did you hear the pattern? Blessings and woes.

Whatever we say about loving enemies and forgiving others, Nora Tubbs Tisdale writes, “...we cannot say that it means a cheap discounting of the unjust actions of others, a quick dismissal of the persecutions borne by those who are victims of injustice, or a [hasty] embrace of the enemy that does not hold the perpetrator of evil accountable to God and others.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The kind of forgiveness Jesus is preaching about is not denial. It isn't pretending that an offense doesn't matter. It isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or allowing ourselves to be mistreated or abused because we're supposed to “forgive and forget.” Forgiveness isn't a detour or a shortcut. Christianity may insist on forgiveness, but it calls us first to mourn, lament, burn with zeal, and to hunger and thirst for justice.

Forgiveness doesn't come cheap. It's a process. And it doesn't always mean a return to the way things were. David Augsburger cautions against equating forgiving with *returning*. In his book *Helping People Forgive*, he writes that forgiveness that is about *returning* can be dangerous and harmful. It can simply be a “restitution of an old order, a backward movement, a regression to the previous situation with the old injustices that motivated the original action or injury.”^{iv}

Forgiveness in the Gospel, says Augsburger, is more about *turning* than “returning.” It is a *revolution*, a “progression into a new situation, a transformation that alters the status quo, that challenges the many compromises that create our systems.... Jesus does not forgive as a means of returning people to the *status quo*. His actions are directed at transforming them, at breaking them out of the limited vision of culture and idol so that they can catch a glimpse of the true God beyond ... the culture's moral system.”^v

Christian forgiveness, whatever we say about it, has its root in God's radical love for us – “a love that is persistently, determinedly, unwaveringly merciful, even toward those totally undeserving of that mercy.”^{vi}

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott begins her section on “Forgiveness” with these words:

I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to say it this way. They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin, and I began to feel punished by my



unwillingness to forgive. By the time I decided to become one of the ones who is heavily into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame, or laughed a little too hysterically.^{viii}

Forgiveness takes work. It's a bit like preparing to run a marathon in middle age. It requires practice. It is not something that come easily or even naturally.

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch watchmaker who lived under Nazi occupation during WWII. She and her family risked their lives to hide Jewish people in their home. Her book *The Hiding Place* recounts their experience. When ten Boom was caught, she was sent to a concentration camp where she was stripped of her dignity, witnessed her father and sister die, and suffered mercilessly at the hands of her captors.

In her memoir, she recounts a time after the war when she was preaching forgiveness at a church in Munich when she encountered a face she recognized. It was one of the SS guards who stood at the shower room door of the processing center in the camp where she and her sister were held. He was one of the first jailers she'd encountered since the war had ended, and seeing him suddenly brought her back to the traumatic scene. She remembered the mocking guards, the heaps of clothes, and her sister's humiliated and pained face.

After her sermon, the guard approached her. He was beaming and bowing, and he said to her, "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein – to think that, as you say, I have been washed of my sins." And then he thrust out his hand to shake hers.

Even though ten Boom had preached forgiveness so many times since the war, in that moment, she confessed that she kept her hand to herself. She writes that, in that moment, angry and vengeful thoughts boiled through her. Yet, even though she was angry, she realized she couldn't stay there emotionally, mentally, spiritually. So, she prayed a silent prayer, saying to herself, "Lord Jesus, forgive me and help me to forgive him." She tried to smile and raise her hand to take his, but she simply could not. She did not feel even the slightest bit of warmth, charity, or compassion toward the man. And so she prayed again to herself, "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give your forgiveness."

Then she recounted what happened next, "As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm, and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me." She



writes, years later, “When God tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”^{viii}

Friends, love of enemies, forgiveness as we have been forgiven, these actions, these decisions do not always come swiftly. They often do not come easily.

This is where and why I think it’s important to note – I think it’s important for you to remember – that Jesus preached this sermon to a great number. This command wasn’t to one or even to a few. It was to the community. There is no way we’d be able to live the commands of Luke 6 on our own. There’s just no human way we’d be able to do it. Yes, this sermon is for you – you, George, you, Elizabeth, and you, _____. But it is addressed to us as a part of a larger community. Who helps us and holds us when we need support. Who offers love and forgiveness and mercy when we can’t seem to even find it for ourselves. The Greek verbs in Jesus’ sermon? They are plural, every one of them.^{ix} So, set yourself in a community – whether it be this one or another – set yourself in a community that helps do this with you, that can help do this for you.

When you can’t find the strength to do it on your own, look around you, look within you, seek God’s help to find it for you.

Reading Luke 6, I cannot help but be drawn to Dr. King’s beautiful and faithful words, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate. . . . Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

May we encourage and hold one another up as we go about the good and important and, at times, incredibly hard work of love and forgiveness. May we rise to Christ’s call, and may we taste and see the full measure of the freedom he brings.

ⁱ Moffett S. Churn, “Between Text and Sermon: Luke 6:27-26,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol. 68(4), 2014, p 428.

ⁱⁱ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “The Gospel We Don’t Want to Hear (or Preach)” in “*Journal for Preachers*, 23 no 3 Easter 2000, p 23-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*

^{viii} Sarah Han, “Day1: Children of the Most High - Episode #4170,” for Feb 23, 2025.

^{ix} Sermon Brainwave Podcast, Ep #1009: “Seventh Sunday after Epiphany (C) – Feb. 23, 2025,” published Feb 9, 2025.

