

## **IT IS GOOD: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES**

Luke 6:27-38

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When people are able to work from home, it sometimes means that they can work from anywhere. Some people are choosing to move to another part of the country, just because they want to. My youngest stepson and his wife decided they wanted to move to Florida - so they did - the kind of free choice that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago.

Most often, when people relocate, it's because their employer wants them to or tells them to. Or people move to be closer to family. Or, especially later in life, people move because they prefer a certain climate.

But there is a new trend in relocation, and I find it extremely disturbing. People are looking for towns, cities and counties where they can live with people whose political views mirror their own. Red zip codes are getting redder and blue zip codes are getting bluer, causing many to rarely interact with folks with whom they disagree. People are purposely moving to places reflecting their views.

I heard that news on the radio last week and it has bothered me ever since. We are choosing to surround ourselves with like-minded people, to live in politically segregated neighborhoods. If this trend grows, we will become even more polarized as a nation.

What will be the result if our divisions grow deeper? How will more polarization affect our ability to work towards liberty and justice for all? Are we moving further away

from what Martin Luther King called “the beloved community”? Or the kind of world envisioned by the biblical prophets - where all people have the ability to flourish?

In our passage for today, Jesus says, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.” And a few verses later, he repeats himself (knowing we would need to hear it more than once) - “Love your enemies and do good to them.”

Jesus clearly is **NOT** endorsing political segregation. In fact, he chose to spend time with people who held differing opinions. He ate with tax collectors who were extorting money from the poor on behalf of the corrupt Roman government. He ate with Pharisees who were suspicious of his every word because they saw him as a threat to their religious authority.

“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.”

One biblical scholar I read this week describes our passage this way: “this is a ridiculous teaching which Jesus gives to his closest followers. Everyone who heard it probably laughed out loud, and for good reason.”

Jesus knows what he’s doing. These words don’t come out of his mouth by accident. He’s trying to wake people up and shake people up. He’s preparing people to live in a **new kind of world**, a world where God’s values are embodied.

He does it again and again. Last week, we read “Blessed are the poor.” “Blessed are the persecuted.” “Woe to the rich, woe to those who have enough to eat.” Those aren’t normal thoughts, not according to the values of **this** world.

But that’s the point. Jesus is preparing us to be citizens of a different kind of world. Where the last are first and the first are last. Where the meek receive blessings

but the rich walk away empty-handed. Where the blind receive their sight, and children are treated with dignity. Where the power of death is overcome by the power of love. That's what life is like in God's realm. Jesus wants us to imagine it, and then step into it.

Every word in today's passage is ridiculous, countercultural, otherworldly. Turn the other cheek. Give away your coat. Lend without expecting repayment. Don't judge.

Does Jesus know that this is not the way the world works? Jesus knows. And Jesus gives this word to his followers, to the insiders. He's saying to them, "Friends, have you started to figure out that the values of this world just don't fit with the God I'm revealing to you?" "We worship a God whose very essence is love, yet we live in a world that worships wealth and power, where the needs of the most vulnerable are disregarded, where the weak are trampled." "We worship a God who values kindness yet we live in a world of gossip, lies, and backstabbing." "Do you really want to live in this world or do you want to step into the world God is imagining for us?"

Throughout history, people who have made a positive impact are those who refuse to be confined, who refuse to conform. Don't tell them that change can only be incremental. They're marching to the beat of their own drummer, listening to a higher calling, seeing the world in a whole new way.

Congressman John Lewis devoted his life, indeed his entire body, to the struggle for justice. He was arrested 40 times during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. He was beaten senseless more times than he could count, once left for dead in a pool

of blood. He spent 31 days in Mississippi's notoriously brutal Parchman Penitentiary. Yet he wrote this, "Release the need to hate, to harbor division and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that battle of good to overcome evil is already won."

There was nothing weak about John Lewis. He embodied a countercultural wisdom - he knew something about love. We tend to think that love is weak and that vengeance is strong.

We are afraid that love means something complacent and passive - that love means that we become doormats and let people hurt us. But love is not a weakness, it is instead a powerful force for good.

Think for a moment about what would happen if we refused to ever heed Jesus' words. If we never, ever loved our enemies, if we never moved towards forgiveness, if instead - we kept alive the feelings of hurt and resentment, if we nursed every wound we'd ever received. Imagine if you woke up every day and wrote a list of every person who'd ever hurt you, reminding yourself of what they did, what they said, so that you'd never forget a single grievance. Now that's power. That kind of obsession can take over your life.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he's giving us the gift of freedom. It's not so much a gift to the person you're forgiving - who may not ever know that's happened. But it's a huge gift to yourself. It allows you to rid yourself of the burden you're carrying and experience how it feels when that weight falls off your shoulders.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, here in this room or wherever you are watching this sermon. Close your eyes and think of a person in your life who has hurt you. Or a relationship that has come apart. Or perhaps for you it's a political figure you just can't stand, or anyone who holds a particular political stance. How do you feel when you imagine that person? Do you feel a sense of tightness in your body when you picture him or her? Now imagine saying to that person, "I don't agree with you, but I see you as a human being and I know you are the way you are because of your life story. I'm going to let go of my anger towards you." How do you think it would feel to be able to do that? (OK, I invite you to open your eyes now.)

Loving our enemies is a gift to ourselves, just as forgiveness is a sign of self-compassion. Being consumed by anger and bitterness is a waste of precious time and energy.

I read this quote this week - **"Loving our enemies is a rational and pragmatic move, an antidote to a consuming culture of anger which is not the way most of us want to live."**

Our passage for today has sometimes been mis-used and mis-interpreted, so let me be clear here: Jesus does not direct us toward justifying harmful behavior. There is a need for tough love in this world - Jesus calls out different people at different times when their behavior is not loving towards God and others. Loving one's enemies does not mean to remain in an abusive relationship or to tolerate exploitation. Loving enemies doesn't mean becoming rolled over by them.

The deeper wisdom of this passage calls us to see that love is actually more powerful than hate. Love can resist the systems of evil and oppression more persuasively, more effectively. Jesus calls us to see the tactics of violence and hatred and refuse to play by their rules. As Martin Luther King said, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

We don't have to follow Jesus' advice. If we're satisfied living in a nation that seems on the brink of some sort of Civil War, if we think it's working to throw barbs at one another on social media, and surround ourselves with people who think like we do, if this is the world we want to pass on to the next generation, then let's keep on noticing one another's faults and moving further away from dialogue and understanding. Or - we could begin to step into another world, perhaps like the one described in this video...(SHOW VIDEO "Brother")