

C Lectionary 7 2.24.19

Luke 6:27-36

Focus Statement: The kingdom of God is revolutionary love.

If you've read much about this Jesus character, one of the things you may have noticed about him is that he rarely gave clear instructions on how to be a disciple. He modeled ministry a lot; that was his main teaching tool. But when he spoke, he tended to use parables that were at best vague. The blessings and woes we read last week are kind of a classic example of that. Blessed are you who are hungry, woe to you who are rich, what are we supposed to do with this information? So I wonder if at first, when Jesus moved on from there to this morning's section, the disciples were like, great, finally some clear instructions to follow!

Of course, then, if they really started to listen to them, that would be when the trouble starts. Because at first listen, this is exactly what we'd expect Jesus to say, right. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you." You might even, if your day's going pretty well and you're in a pretty good mood think, yeah, ok, I can handle that. I love people, I don't hate anyone. I'm generous. Moving on, what's next?

But this is the season of Epiphany, where the question we're asking ourselves is what is epiphanic, what is revealed to us about the nature of God, the nature of Jesus, and here, I think the nature of the Kingdom of God in these texts? So I want to read this again, and I invite you to really listen to these words with the question, what if this is what the Kingdom of God is really like, and what is different between what Jesus says, and how we live, move, experience the world? And don't worry, there will be no sharing, this is totally a

rhetorical question. But I think this passage is good news for us, great news, life-changing news. But like all of the law parts of scripture, before it can change us, we need to let it make us a little bit uncomfortable.

Jesus said to his disciples, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for this who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the other cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The Gospel, the good news, of the Lord.

How'd that feel? Anyone uncomfortable yet? Ever had anything stolen and not wanted it back? Or wished everyone would just come around to your way of thinking? Or not given something to someone who begged for it? And now, if you're me, and I'm guessing, if you're human, the rationalization starts. Well, come on now. We can't give to everyone who begs from us. What about the guy with the face tattoo who sits in front of the post office and always needs five dollars for a bus ticket or gas money or [insert excuse here]? What about that neighbor who always borrows your tools and never returns them? Are you supposed to give your screaming two-year-old a cookie before dinner just because she's begging you? Where do we draw the line here, Jesus!

No, right, obviously Jesus is not telling you that angry two-year-olds dictate the rules of dinnertime, that's actually bad parenting. But Jesus is, I think, intending to make the

disciples and us uncomfortable, because Jesus is trying to make us think. To make us see the difference between how we live, the motivations that drive us, and what life is like in the Kingdom of God. Remember where this teaching took place. What Jesus is doing here is bringing us back to the level plain, to the place where our work, our worth, our value are based only on Jesus and his love for us. And so is everyone else's.

And this, friends, I get it, is super hard. Because, right, we don't live in the Kingdom of God. We live on earth. And on earth, if you let someone steal your stuff, all you're going to end up with is your stuff stolen. And if you turn the other cheek when someone hits you, they may well just hit you again. But this is what Jesus says to do. So how do we do it?

One of the things I love about not just our core values, but specifically about the way we arranged them, is that love and grace are first. And everything else, inclusion, social justice, action, flows from those first two. Because love and grace are the font, the genesis of everything, of how we live and act and are in the world. And I've told this story before, but I think it bears repeating, because for me this was the time that I truly understood what love and grace, what doing good to those who hate you and blessing those who curse you, means, and more importantly how that kind of love and grace in practice are transformational.

After college I worked at a homeless shelter in Washington, DC. The manager of the drop-in day center was a woman named Evelyn. And Evelyn was an intimidating woman. She was tall, broad-shouldered, strong, heavily tattooed, with a look that said she wasn't

messaging. The day shelter crowd could be a rough crowd, but Evelyn kept everyone in line. There were rules, and they would be followed, and if they were not, Evelyn showed you to the door.

Which seemed weird to me, because we were supposed to have this broad, welcoming, open-door policy, and I wasn't sure how I felt about people being banned from the premises. Until one day, Evelyn told us her story. Evelyn had first come to the shelter twenty-years before looking for a hot meal and a place to get her needs met. She came violent, angry, and heavily into drugs. The manager of the shelter at that time was a tiny birdlike woman named Edna. Evelyn explained how she showed up cussing, pushing her weight around, demanding things, and Edna put her out, told her to come back when she'd calmed down. Evelyn came back the next day, got a hot meal, started mouthing off, got put out again. Next day, same story, hot meal, mouth off, out. After a few times through of this, when Edna went to put her out, Evelyn got right up in her face, "why do you keep putting me out?" Edna replied, "there are rules here for everyone's safety, and you keep deciding not to follow them. You can choose differently, but you don't." Surprised by the courage of the tiny woman, Evelyn then asked, "and why do you keep letting me back in?" "Because," Edna replied, "the rules are here to protect you too. You deserve all of what we have to offer, it's all for you. Including the opportunity to be here and to be safe. I don't know what's going on in your head. Just because this time you chose not to be here doesn't mean you don't deserve the opportunity to make a different choice next time."

That, Evelyn explained to us, is what love looked like. A love that valued Evelyn's right to choose while simultaneously showing her the result of that choice. That day, Evelyn was out again. The next day, she made a different choice, and a different one, and a different one. It wasn't all puppies and rainbows, she got put out a bunch more times. But Edna kept putting her out, and letting her back in. And Evelyn got into recovery, stopped turning to violence as the solution, and started getting her life back together. She got an apartment, got reunited with her kids, earned her GED, earned a certification in drug counseling, and became the manager of the same shelter that she now credits for saving her life by dumping her out of it so many times. Friends, that's what transformational love does. It's hard, and it's long, and it's painful and it changes us.

So I want to get serious for a minute here and bring this in, and talk about conflict.

Specifically about how I hope we handle conflict here at Trinity Lutheran Church. Because we're small, but we're growing. And we're inviting in new people who don't know all our norms and ways. And, we're people. Which means, there will be conflict. So, when there's conflict, the first thing I always find it helpful to do is take a deep breath, and calm down. I'm Swedish, and we are a passive aggressive people, so I carry conflict right here in my upper chest, like a knot. And I can't think when that knot is pulsing. So, step one, breath. Step two, pray. Right there, verse twenty-eight, pray for those who abuse you. The funny thing I've always found about prayer is the person my prayer changes is always me. It doesn't matter who I pray for, or what I pray about, I'm the one who ends up changed. So, pray. Pray for clarity, pray for understanding, pray to see the other side of the story. And then, third, talk to the person. If the other person isn't ready to talk to you yet, or if it

doesn't go well, maybe they didn't finish the first two steps yet, or maybe you weren't quite as done as you thought. Either way, walk away, try again, or bring someone else in. Tell me, tell someone on council. Not in a gossipy way, but in a, look, I'm really struggling with such-and-such situation and I need help sort of a way. And fourth, be ready for the solution to not be exactly what you'd hoped for, or for the possibility that there can't even really be a solution, at least not yet. We're still in the not yet side of the already and not yet of the kingdom of God and sometimes people are just mean. Even church people. Even me. Ask Cat. Sometimes true love and grace is deciding that there are irreconcilable differences, and on this side of heaven that truly is a solution, and can be the most grace-filled and loving one there is. The Bible says love your enemies, it doesn't say you have to hang out with them.

This is a bit more of a practical, how-to sermon than I normally preach. But I think it's important we, I, talk openly about conflict, about the reality there will be conflict, and about what we can do to move through it. Not to solve it, not to never disagree, but to move through it. I think it's important because I truly believe that as we do this. As we disagree and give each other grace, and make up, or don't, we are not just creating a healthy church community, we are literally bringing the Kingdom of God to fruition. Conflict is natural, but moving through it in ways that are healthy and grace-filled in this broken world is not. So when we find ways of doing the unnatural, of disagreeing and moving forward together, we are modeling a different way of living, the way of the Kingdom of God. Amen.