

February 23, 2025
The Rev. Mark Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

Love Your Enemies: Really?

“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. 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. Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. Instead, 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 himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, 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.” Luke 6

We’ve already prayed these words this morning. Let’s pray them again. O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you.

You have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing.

Last week we heard a series of blessings and woes in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. Today, the teaching continues. And there are some hard sayings to hear and consider.

Love your enemies. Love those who may never love you in return. And just so we are all on the same page and know what kind of love we are talking about -- we are talking about the unconditional kind of love that goes “all-in” without reservation. It is the kind of parental love that welcomes back a wayward lost prodigal son and then calls for a celebration. It is the Samaritan kind of love that crosses the road to help a stranger in need. It is about doing good, blessing, praising, lifting up and praying for the other. It is, can we all agree, the hardest kind of love.

“But I say to you who are listening.” Are we listening?

Is today’s reading precisely the gospel passage we need to hear in this moment of uncertainty, strife, fear and anxiety that doesn’t seem to lift?

When I hear these hard words, there is a part of me that wants to ask Jesus: really? Weren’t you just being hyperbolic and exaggerating to get our attention. Jesus has used these devices before. He couldn’t have meant it literally. Why show love to those who have nothing good to say or do? Love the dictator, horrible boss, the abuser, the drive-by shooter?

“Do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. 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.”

And then I would ask: how? How can I show and express love to those coming for me and those I care about with such disregard and disdain? We could rationalize the words – find a way to wiggle out of them by dismissing them as aspirational and not prescriptive. Let’s call them goals. Words fit for a Savior or a saint but not for ordinary people.

During our Men’s group yesterday one of those who attended remembered a basic teaching from his high school physics class: “Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.” This is the third of Sir Isaac Newton’s laws of physics. If you push on something, it comes back against you. So, if you lean against a wall, the wall pushes back on you as hard as you push. Actions create reactions. What I have come to see and know is this: the kind of energy I expend and push out into the world has a way of coming back to me: good and bad. A smile is often returned. One door that is opened for another is opened for me. Grace and forgiveness offered finds its way back.

When air around us gets heavy, life gets dark, and the people and the climate around us grows more and more negative and toxic – the teachings this morning reminds us to take a moment, step back and re-orient ourselves.

Loving your enemies and those who curse you – I don’t believe God is asking any of us to get walked over. As I like to say: we are not meant to be “doormats for Jesus.”

In John 5 when Jesus heals the man who had been sick for 38 years and lived his life waiting for a passerby to put him in a healing pool of water. Jesus asked him, “Do you want to get well.” Then Jesus said: “get up, pick up your mat, and walk.”

We are called to walk and live in a different way. A better way. A God-centered way. And it is a way that is hard and challenging. We all know that it’s open season for hatred and demonizing in today’s world. Yet someone has to make the turn to something more. To make it stop. I think of the famous quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.”

Luke’s gospel includes the Golden Rule that all children learn in school. “Do to others as you would have them to do you.” This rule is not the exclusive domain of Christians, for it was widely circulated in the ancient world. It speaks of balance and fairness. If we expect kindness – be kind. If you don’t want to be judged for who you are or the mistakes you have made – don’t do it to others. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.”

There will always be people who will want to try to convince us that charity begins at home. A national Politian recently turned heads when he cited a Christian concept “that you love your family and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens, and then after that, prioritize the rest of the world.” That got a whole lot of people talking and getting riled up.

Kat Armas, a Cuban American author, writing in the National Catholic Reporter, looking back at the words of Jesus and the life of the Early Church responds with this: “The point wasn't about setting limits on love. It was about breaking them down — taking the gospel beyond familiar spaces and into contested ones. The real question is not whether love begins at home. It's what we do with it — how far we are willing to change ourselves and the world around us.”

Think about it. The problem with creating a hierarchy for love – first love family, then neighbor, then community, then citizens and then the rest of the world – I really wonder if by the end there's much love to go around at all.

Armas writes that it all “feeds the myth that some people are more deserving of our care than others. It's a framework that makes sense in a world governed by scarcity and fear, where protection comes at the expense of others. But Jesus never speaks of love as something to be rationed. He speaks of love as abundance — a table where there is enough for everyone.”

Love your enemies. And that is confounding and when I see God face to face that will be something I want to bring up.

The core of what I've read about Archbishop Tutu's work on post-apartheid South Africa was that unless the person who was harmed finds a way to speak their truth, express their hurt and loss to the one who oppressed them, they would likely continue to be held down and back by the trauma of violence and hatred. Once they worked their way to place of even unsteady forgiveness, the chains that held them down began to fall away.

I've come to learn in my life that such a radical and hard saying by Jesus is not so much about the enemy as much as I had once thought. Loving, forgiving and not judging is about us and our relationship with God. And we know that without love, whatever we do is worth nothing.