SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Not So Impossible Love”* Luke 6:27-38

Whew! The reading we just heard has got to be one of the hardest passages in the Bible. I cannot imagine what it sounded like to the first people who heard these words. All I know is that you and I live in a world where these words have echoed through the centuries, and we *still* find them challenging, even confusing.

Jesus’ words are challenging because they sound so counter-intuitive to our safety and well-being. And yet we know that he offered them to us for just that reason—that we might be safe and cared for.

They are confusing because this 2,000-year-old idea has been actually been tested so *rarely* that even those of us who have heard Jesus’ words all of our lives still wonder what they mean. We wonder how we are supposed to carry them out. How are we supposed to *live* with these things that Jesus wants us to do?

I suspect that many of us hear these words as a good—even a *great*—*ideal*, but not as *good* *ideas*. Most of us can imagine all sorts of draw-backs to carrying out these words literally. Most of us think that literally living this ideal could cause others to think us strange, may even make them suspicious of us—at the very least. At the very worst, we could come to be considered “losers,” or “soft”—unable to make our way in the world—and really good targets for all sorts of scoundrels.

So, we hear this part of Jesus’ sermon and file it away in the back of our minds, all the while telling ourselves that while it expresses a nice sentiment, loving one’s enemies is not the way the world works, and we have to live in the *real world*, not in a make-believe world of upside-down ethics.

I imagine many people—now and for all of the 2,000 years that have passed—have thought of Jesus’ words as hopelessly unconnected to human experience, or unable to fathom human nature and character. Jesus, we think, has grossly over-estimated humankind’s capacity or desire for such noble behavior.

However, when we look a little closer at how Jesus has offered these words, we find that he understands human nature quite well.

Look again at how Jesus urges us to love our enemies. It is not just because it is the right thing to do. It is because there is no *glory* or *credit* in loving our friends or those who can help us (see vv. 32-34). What Jesus explicitly tells us is that if we want some kind of “credit,” if we really want “glory,” we should try loving our *enemies*. What is more: if we do we will get something in return: “Great will be your rewards be in heaven,” says Jesus (v. 35).

As one commentator has put it: “So, when we love our enemies, there is a payoff! At the very least, we get a good feeling, we can congratulate ourselves on being faithful to the ideals of our faith.”

When you put is that way, Jesus sounds very practical. And seems to refute the common perception that he was out of touch with the real world. Jesus absolutely knew how the world operates!

Well, yes. Jesus does know us. But, no. Jesus is not suggesting that we can buy our way into heaven. Nor is he suggesting that God’s favor can be purchased. To hold such a thought is really quite sad because it turns your life and mine, and everyone else’s life into a commodity to be bought and sold. It can even make God the highest bidder for our loyalty and faithfulness.

Nothing can be further from Jesus’ message, his good news for all of humankind. Indeed, the good news Jesus brings comes to us from a God who sent Jesus into the world freely, gladly, an act of unimaginable generosity.

And thought Jesus’ life—and the entirety of the Bible before Jesus’ life—that is throughout Jesus’ life and the bible, even before Jesus was born into the world, we are constantly being called to turn our attention toward God, toward the One who is the Holy One. Our worship, adoration, and reverence are all supposed to be directed toward this Holy God who deserves our love and praise for all of the ways in which God has blessed us, for the generosity that has been showered upon us.

So, Jesus’ declaration—great will be your reward in heaven—is the promise that our joy will be complete and absolute when we come face-to-face with the One whom we have served so well and faithfully. It is like doing something good—in this life—for a loved one. The doing itself is the reward and our joy is increased every time we are with our loved one.

*That* is the reward—being aware of all of the joy and satisfaction we have given to our gracious God.

What is more, when we can orient our lives toward loving God, this passage becomes less impossible to accomplish. Jesus was not setting the bar too high. It just seems that way because of the often visceral reaction we can have toward people with whom we do not agree, people who we see as unreasonable, people who are very unlike us. Sometimes, the people who we do *not* love can be frightening, even violent.

That brings us to what is perhaps one of hardest part in Jesus’ sermon. The part where he declares:

*Love your enemies do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 30Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.*

One commentator has asked: How is this good news for the poor? For the oppressed? For those living with injustice, institutional and otherwise? Shall we just forget those indignities and outrage?

I do not believe that is what the Christ who loves humankind asked of us. The Christ who went forward in his ministry, even when it led him to the pain and humiliation of the cross, promised that his love and his life were not just for us, but for *all* of God’s beloved people. Jesus acknowledged each and every one of us as having been made by God—we are all God’s handiwork. No one is left out.

And just as Jesus knows human character well enough to help us interpret the good we do as a reward waiting for us in heaven, he also knows what happens to the human heart and mind when we hate and fear others—even when we believe we have been given some justification.

When we hate or fear others, we often find ourselves losing the one thing we have in common—our humanity. And once we lose sight of another’s humanity, we begin to lose our own. Once they are no more than the brutish names we call them, we effectively cast them out beyond our ability to be in relationship with them. This makes us in opposition to Christ who wants to bring us together, and who is with them and us, even now.

So, how do we do this impossible thing Jesus asked us to do so many centuries ago? How do we do it knowing that we have never lived-up to his call upon our faithfulness—not with absolute constancy, and knowing that this has never been a reliable characteristic of the human character?

One of the first things I hope we will do is remember the *first* part of Jesus’ sermon—the part we heard last week—where he assured us of how we are held in blessing in God’s arms—all of those blessings were not for super human beings. They were for you and me and all human creatures.

And that is the most important thing to remember: that God is always going to call us back to our own humanity, our blessedness.

And so, when we listen to Jesus’ words—especially these very difficult words—We need to hear them within the context of the cross he is moving ever closer to, even in this passage.

If we can, then the first thing we see when we contemplate the cross is human suffering—his suffering, like our suffering. This is our God, the God who knows our suffering, knows what it is like to live among those with whom we disagree and dislike, even fear.

God knows what it is like to be vulnerable and live among the violent.

God knows what it is like to be hungry and thirsty and naked and live among the greedy.

God knows what it is like to be browbeaten and demoralized and live among the ignorant and uncaring.

And because God knows these indignities we are asked—indeed, invited—to be in partnership with God to bring an end to the suffering we see all around us. We are called to recognize and faithfully honor the humanity of *all* people, even, perhaps *especially* even our enemies.

If we can, then we move closer Jesus and his call in this passage. We can move closer to that ideal that Christ inspired in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he echoed Jesus’ words to love our enemies when he preached about how we *and* our enemies are—in our common humanity—gathered before God in the “inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Friends, as you and I move though the lives we have been given, we can live in fear, separated from one another. Or we can come together as the body of Christ, and we can treasure our God-given humanity, even as we seek that in all of God’s beloved people, all of them.

This is what I pray for myself, and for you, and for all of us.

May it be so. Amen.