

Will We Trust God's Lead and Love Our Enemies?

Friends, old and new, we arrive together to a moment of reflection on this seventh Sunday after Epiphany. During this season in the church year, we meditate on the Christ light that Jesus embodied in the world and wonder how we might more effectively follow his lead, embodying that same light through our living. At the outset of a sermon, I typically encourage us to remember that we are each created and sustained by the fathomless love that is God. Given the gospel reading we have just heard, I also want to encourage us today to recognize that our enemies are each created and sustained by the fathomless love of God. As we face into a new week, I invite us to wonder together, **will we trust God's lead and love our enemies?** Please pray with me.

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God; we long to be more fully open to your presence and your intention for our lives. Come and speak the truth of your strong love straight into our very beings. As you stir our spirits and our intellects, make us receptive to your deep wisdom and companionship. O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow sojourners, in our gospel reading for today, Jesus seems to lay out his code of ethics – his guiding principles for interacting with other humans. He focuses particularly on attitudes and actions toward the enemy and toward the stranger. Hear again Jesus' advice boiled down to the attitudes and actions he implores us to consider:

“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you... Do to others what you would have them to do you... Lend without expecting repayment... Be compassionate... Don't judge... Don't condemn... Pardon... Give...”

At first glance, this teaching by Jesus seems to be specifically about expressing and demonstrating compassion toward the other.

However, his bold words to us today also remind us about the power of self-compassion. A moment ago, I noted that we worship a God whose love reminds each of us that both I and each other being is created and sustained by God – the source of love.

We recall that, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus was remembered as having this key conversation with a group of his religious elders. We encounter a narrative moment in the twenty-second chapter of Matthew that goes like this:

“When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

In my own spiritual journey, I have long been struck by how Jesus phrases loving oneself as a given. In certain light, we cannot love our neighbors unless we already love ourselves. Many of us have experienced pockets of our Christian tradition in which shame-based teachings are deeply entrenched and interwoven into versions of the gospel message. There is such a vital difference between recognizing sinful behavior (guilt - that which separates us from the love of God in self and other through our behaviors) and teaching a conviction that our human essence displayed in all its beautiful diversity is somehow evil and in need of conversion by an other-worldly power. Jesus clearly would not have bought into that kind of shaming bologna. He taught others to love self and other – to honor the Christ light in themselves and each other person with whom they intersected. If we believe we have all been created in God’s image, then love is always and already saving and renewing each of us for Love’s work and needs each of us just as we are.

In this thematic vein of balancing love of other with love of self, I highly recommend to people of all ages Douglas Wood's three children's books in his *Old Turtle* series. In the book *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth* (spoiler alert), the punchline is the recognition that "we are loved... and so are they." "We are loved... and so are they."

Let's explore Jesus' teaching with an openness toward learning to love the other from our grounding in love of self. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus seems to focus on attitudes and actions toward two different kinds of others – the enemy and the stranger. In order to mine the treasure trove of his words and make a bit of sense out of them, I have done some rearranging.

In regard to enemies, Jesus said, *"To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well. Love your enemies and do good to them... Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Pardon, and you'll be pardoned."*

I wonder, who is one of your enemies? Meaning, who has hurt or harmed you? How do we do good and show love to our enemies?

Often, our defenses rise and our hearts quicken nervously from the moment our interactions begin with an enemy. I believe firmly that the best way (or one of the best ways) to disarm our enemies is by speaking truth, even through tears and a shaking voice. We need to find space that is safe enough to be so brave to share our true experience of someone's actions toward us. But the courage inherent in honest vulnerability is audacious in the best way possible. Honest, brave vulnerability can change a heart (or at least stop someone in their tracks) and lead to changed behavior sometimes.

I wonder, toward whom have you been an enemy? Meaning, whom do you know who you have hurt or harmed? Try making space for that one to be honestly, bravely vulnerable.

From where do we draw strength for this work of love toward our enemies? The Psalmist writes, *“Don’t be vexed [that is - provoked, aggravated, exasperated] by evildoers, and don’t be envious of the corrupt! They’ll soon fade like grass, and wither away like unwatered plants. Trust in God, and do good... Delight in God... Commit your way to God, and trust in God; God will take action.”* And God will take action through each of us.

Now let’s turn to wondering about those whom we experience as strangers – those other others. Jesus said, *“Give to all who beg from you. When someone takes what is yours, don’t demand it back... If you love those who love you, what credit does that do you? ... If you do good only to those who do good to you, what credit does that do you?... If you lend to those you expect to repay you, what credit does that do you?... Lend without expecting repayment, and your reward will be great. Don’t judge, and you won’t be judged. Give, and it will be given to you... For the amount you measure out is the amount you’ll be given back. Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate.”*

I wonder, who is a stranger to you? In other words, in whose story and experience have you not yet invested your attention and care?

How might you bridge the divide such that a stranger becomes more someone with whom you honor your interdependence? Perhaps you and that stranger could each experience the image of God in one another.

I would like to close by reading the encouraging, emboldening words of the Psalmist. I invite you to hear them as a blessing spoken to you. You might choose to close your eyes and hold your hands open to receive these words of blessing from the Hebrew Psalmist as you approach the hard work of loving self, enemy and stranger:

“Don’t be vexed by evildoers, and don’t be envious of the corrupt! They’ll soon fade like grass, and wither away like unwatered plants.

*Trust in God, and do good, and you'll dwell in the land and enjoy security.
Delight in God, and you'll be given the desires of your heart.*

*Commit your way to God, and trust in God; God will take action, making your
vindication as sure as the dawn and your integrity as bright as noonday.*

*Be still before God and wait patiently; don't fret about those who amass great
fortunes and carry out their schemes unchallenged.*

*Let go of your anger, and leave resentment behind. And stop worrying! It
produces nothing but evil, and evildoers will be cut off. But those who put their
hope in God—they will inherit the land.*

*A little while longer, and the violent will be no more; no matter how hard you
look for them, they will not be found. But the gentle will inherit the land, and
will enjoy abundant peace.”*

Friends, let's trust God to empower us to love more generously – ourselves,
our enemies, and those who are yet strangers to us. Love is counting on us.
Amen.

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