



“Beyond Simple Fairness”
Scripture – Luke 6:27-36
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 24, 2019

What comes to mind when you hear “Do to others as you would have them do to you?” Do you hear: Be kind to people? Be friendly to strangers? When you are checking out at Trader Joe’s say, “Have a nice day?”

Some form of what has come to be known as the Golden Rule is found in every major world religion. It calls on us to treat each person with the same kindness, respect, and dignity that we expect from others. It expresses the innate sense of fairness for which most people seem to be hard-wired whether they are religious or not. That’s not to say that everyone’s moral compass is balanced. Most of us can likely name a few people who expect to receive far better treatment than they dish out. But the Golden Rule establishes an ethical foundation for interpersonal relationships. What you feel is right and fair for you ought to be right and fair for others. Imagine how different our world would be if everyone lived by this elemental axiom. The world would be humane and more equitable.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The adage predates Jesus by centuries, but as we discover in this morning’s passage, Jesus stretches its meaning beyond the boundaries of simple fairness. We might expect Jesus to explain the intention of the Golden Rule by saying, “Love your family, be gracious with your friends, be cordial to your neighbors, and extend hospitality to strangers.” But Jesus rattles us awake and convulses our emotions when he says, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.”

And lest we think Jesus was addressing a homogeneous community where getting along with others was easier, consider the context within which Jesus was speaking. The gospels inform us that initially, Jesus believed he was called to focus his ministry only on his own people – fellow Jews. However, at some point, Jesus felt called to take his message and his healing ministry beyond Jews to Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles erected walls between one another and did not see the other in a more favorable light. Jesus and his disciples would venture into towns and villages in Galilee and Judea – Jewish territory – then they would occasionally travel to Gentile lands. However, today’s episode occurred when Jesus was talking to a crowd that included both Jews and Gentiles – people who had been taught since birth: “You cannot trust *those* people.”

Imagine the reaction of those in the crowd who were listening to Jesus. It was already uncomfortable to be together with others so unlike themselves. When Jesus told them to love their enemies, was there a wave of eye rolling? How many dismissed Jesus as an impractical idealist with no understanding of the real world? Did some grumble aloud? Were some beginning to stomp away, and did Jesus raise his voice so that those walking out would be sure to hear him declare, “If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners

do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity?"¹

Most teachings of Jesus are challenging, but his words in today's passage sound beyond challenging. They sound out of reach. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Now? Today? Perhaps this teaching is to be put on hold until the day when weapons have been discarded, racism erased, poverty eradicated, and abuse eliminated. Maybe then, such radical love will be practical.

Let's be honest. Who among us has not hoped that the person who betrayed us, receives her comeuppance? Who has not hoped that a person who sows the seed of hate will reap hate in return?

Recently a colleague reminded me of how different people can be at various stages of life. Ten years ago when he began working at his current congregation, he met a man named Bob whom he described as "a delightful man who arrived early on Sunday mornings to prepare the sanctuary for worship; he was friendly and engaging, and maintained a positive attitude. The two had lunch together about every six months and developed a friendship."

Then, "Bob was diagnosed with a fast-growing brain tumor and died within a short time. At his funeral, Bob's brother, who was a pastor, spoke. He described Bob as a difficult person; he even said that family members might have had a hard time deciding to attend his funeral."

Following the funeral, Bob's pastor, who had developed a nice relationship with him, wrote the brother and shared his dismay at how he had spoken poorly about Bob. After all, it was the man's *funeral*.

The brother wrote a thorough reply. For many years, Bob had caused trouble and wrecked family ties. At the funeral, the brother "was trying to help family members understand the complexities of their relationships and encourage them to forgive Bob."

He also wrote, "We all go through seasons of life. You met Bob later in life; he was different then. But don't judge others who knew him in a different season."²

I have no idea what precipitated the changes in Bob's life from a difficult person to a delightful one, but it reminded me that people can change. Someone who is arrogant can mellow. Someone with a short fuse can become patient. Someone quick to condemn can become more understanding.

Of course, this means we can change, too. But can we change to the degree Jesus expects? When people hurt us, we have a natural instinct to get even. Hollywood capitalizes on this human propensity for revenge and churns out movie after movie where the hero exacts vengeance, and usually with epic violence. We cheer the payback and call it justice.

It helps to remember that a person's life experiences can have a profound impact on their character. Some grow up in a loving and healthy household, some grow up in a dysfunctional family, and some are victims of abuse. Women are treated differently than men. People of color, people in the LGBTQ community, and people with mental illness regularly face degrading treatment that some of us have never experienced.

Moreover, those who suffer from depression, anxiety or exaggerated fears can be difficult to be around. People who openly grieve the loss of a loved one or live with chronic pain or have a serious medical condition can ooze toxicity. Straining to comprehend the road that someone else has had to walk can soften our heart and help us become more forgiving.

It also helps to remember that none of us is perfect. There is darkness in the best of us, and goodness in the worst of us.

It is essential to remember that forgiving someone does not imply excusing their actions. Jesus does not call on us to condone unscrupulous behavior. He does not declare that we should turn a blind eye to abuse. He does not encourage us to grant evil a pass. He is talking about showing the world a better way than revenge – a way that has the potential of transforming destructive behavior to something life-enhancing and to sever the cord that is tied to the anger gnawing at our soul.

Jesus calls on us to do things that are difficult. To care for the poor, to welcome strangers, and to stand up for people who are oppressed. Yet, of all the difficult things he calls on us to do, the most onerous and the most distasteful, may be this: Love your enemies.

I confess that I often fall short of what Jesus expects. But I am inspired to keep straining toward this goal when I hear the stories of people who achieve it.

Becca Stevens is a pastor who works at Thistle Farms, a community for women survivors of trafficking, addiction, and violence. Her work there has taught her that forgiveness does not mean you do not hold someone accountable for the cruelty they inflicted. It does not mean you will escape the trauma. But, forgiveness does mean there is a path forward. Some of the steps on that path are mercy and not letting the enemy blind you to the beauty of the world.

There is a woman named Sheila who was first trafficked at the age of five. She entered the Thistle Farms Community just over 10 years ago. Wounded and suffering with cancer, Sheila trekked a dark and painful valley before she found freedom and healing. She found the strength to forgive her betrayer, and that enabled her to go back to school to earn a college degree, which led to a job that prompted her mission to help other survivors. Sheila found a loving man, married him, and they have two delightful children. She has become a nationally recognized resource for healing and hope for women who are trafficked and she has helped launch numerous survival programs across the country.³ She could have lived the remainder of her life bitter and broken, but forgiveness opened the door to a new life.

The final two verses of our passage may hold the key to our understanding and our action. Jesus repeats what he said earlier, “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Then, he says, “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

God is not simply kind to those who exhibit kindness. God is not only loving toward those who express appreciation. Jesus says that God is kind to everyone, even those who are wicked and ungrateful.

God loves each person as a parent cherishes her child. And like a parent, God loves us even when God does not like what we do. When people twist the truth, impugn the character of others, act only in self-interest, and seek revenge, community is destroyed. We are not encouraged to accommodate such evil and injustice.

That is why it is critical to make the distinction between a person and the person’s actions. I can love a person because he is created in the image of God, but I can hate what he is doing to the wider community, to me, and to himself. We hate the sin, but love the sinner, and we keep in mind that there is a distinct difference in resisting someone with hate and resisting someone with love. Hate seeks to destroy. Love seeks to transform.

We are not permanent residents of this world. We are only temporary visitors. It falls to us to live the most beautiful existence possible in our quickly evaporating time. According to Jesus, we are to engage in a perpetual ministry of reconciliation. We are called from beyond ourselves and from deep within ourselves to mend the shredded fabric of society. Love and forgiveness are the needle and thread that, stitch by stitch, transform the tattered cloth into a thing of beauty.

NOTES

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2002).
2. Don McMinn, "Accept people in different seasons of their lives," don@donmcminn.com, February 19, 2019.
3. Becca Stevens, "Loving Our Enemies Is Our Saving Grace," Day1.org, February 24, 2019.

Blessing of the Prayer Shawls ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Weaver of Creation, Comfort of the Weary, as we bless these prayer shawls, we celebrate the opportunity to share tangible gifts of compassion with those in need. We give thanks for the artistry, dedication, and care of Close Knit, and pray that the love with which these shawls were created may encircle those who receive them. We lift before you these sisters and brothers – many of whom know too well the shroud of grief, the ache of loneliness, or the pain of illness – and we entrust them to your care.

Gracious God, bless these shawls, that they may be reminders of the faithful love and abiding care you bestow upon all people – especially those who yearn for your comfort.

Bless those who receive these gifts, that they may feel your tender embrace whenever they wrap them around their shoulders and know in their hearts the comfort of your presence.

And bless us – we pray – to your service, that we might offer compassion, practice kindness, nurture peace, and participate in your healing work ... until the day when every tear is wiped away and all creation sings for joy.

We lift this and every prayer in the name of your son, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.