

Notes on Scripture

No one comes to church on Sunday already thinking, “I would really like a challenge today; perhaps I will be asked to love my enemy.”

But I say to you that listen...

Luke 6:27–38 27

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse 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 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. “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 hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But 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 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.”

“Counterintuitive” is a good way to sum up this passage; in fact, if you look up “counterintuitive” in the dictionary, there should be a link to Luke 6 there illustrating what the word means. I know there isn’t, but there should be.

Because what we find in this next-to-last segment of Luke’s Sermon on the Plain is, as the dictionary defines it, “counter to what intuition would lead one to expect.” Surely, our intuition and instincts about religion in general lead us to expect that we must be loving, that we should be generous, that we ought to avoid violence. Those, you might say, are moral universals, as true in the other great religions of the world as they are in Christianity.

But nice-sounding platitudes are not the ethics of Jesus. In this stretch of Luke's story, which sadly lives in the shadow of the more famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out what I called in my sermon title, Ethics, on Steroids!

Ethics, as we are learning in our class on Ethics in the Workplace, are not great thoughts, deep philosophizing, meditative abstractions. Ethics are behavior. How you and I act. What we do, not what we talk about or think. And **do** is the hot button Jesus keeps pressing in this passage. And it would be a remarkable person – a saint, really – who wasn't set back on his or her heels by the ethic Jesus is declaring: Do good to those who hate you. If anyone smacks you on the cheek, offer them the other one. If someone rips the coat off your back, give them your shirt as well.

Who lives like that? Does that sound like the world you and I experience day in and day out? Is that how societies are structured; countries are governed; criminal justice is administered? If this recommended way of life sounded as ridiculous in the first century as it does in the 21st, why did Jesus offer it?

Well, there is an answer to that question, but you might not like it. I don't. It offends and confuses me, which could be what Jesus intended. And the explanation of this "Christ ethic" begins in a compact, three-verse string right in the middle of today's lesson. I'll paraphrase it for you: If you love those who love you, so what? If you exchange favors with a friend, big deal. If you strike a clever business deal, and make a profit, how is that admirable?

Right there, Jesus puts his listeners on notice. He takes conventional ethics, the ones that you and I are quite comfortable with, and says: Really, is this the best you can do? Love those who love you; do a favor for a friend; earn interest at someone else's expense? And as he does a number of times in the gospels – memorably in the series of sayings that begin "you have heard it said...but I tell you"-- Jesus here, like there, raises the stakes, and the expectations.

This elevation of the ethic we Christians are called to follow – even if we consistently fall short – got me to thinking about a modern Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom our ethics class heard a little about this past week. Bonhoeffer's ethic was rooted deeply in Jesus' teachings of the sermons on the Mount and on the Plain. And Bonhoeffer famously defined the "higher calling" he gleaned from those sermons with what I guess you might call his "riff" on cheap and costly grace. In a pounding declaration of faith Bonhoeffer wrote:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession.... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without sacrifice, grace without the cross...

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a person will gladly go and sell all that he or she has. It is costly because it costs a person's life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life.

In his cheap and costly grace formula, Bonhoeffer sets up the same contrast Jesus does between the comfortable and conventional, on the one hand, and the demanding and the radical, on the other. Cheap and costly grace is Bonhoeffer's answer to the question, why did Jesus offer this "impossible" ethic? Because, in striving for that ethic, the only true life is found.

Jesus' answer to the question -- why this way of life? -- is simple, and direct. Because God is merciful. Because God will withhold judgment. Because God will not condemn. Because God will forgive. And because, Jesus sort of slyly inserts into this narrative, God is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked. I guess there's hope for us there!

And then Jesus cements that string of thoughts together with what I've always found to be a metaphor of hope, accompanied by a subtle but still potent warning. Jesus talks about a measure, and the image he's using was common in an agrarian society. A person goes to the marketplace with a large apron which a seller of grain fills, then tamps down, then fills again to the point of overflowing. Why do this? Because the grain merchant is merciful, generous, and loving.

I realize that an apron full of grain is not how most of us get our daily food, so I want to illustrate this same point with a prop -- this measuring cup. This is the metaphor of hope and promise -- the cup of the kingdom of God filled to the brim and beyond.

That is the gift to us, freely and joyfully given. But the question on which this whole sermon hinges is -- what do we do in response; what is our ethic, our behavior? Offer a half-measure of generosity? An ounce and a half of forgiveness? A smidgen of sacrifice?

Or are we capable, following Christ's example, of this: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Still sounds way counterintuitive, even after all we've heard, these ethics on steroids.

But Jesus did offer a final word, a closing thought on the topic: "The measure you give will be the measure you get back." So are we encouraged, or terrified, by those words? I guess that depends on us. Amen.