

Rev. Joan Pell
Sierra Pines United Methodist Church
Sermon: 2/17/2019
Stand-Alone Sermon
Scripture: Luke 6:27-38

Love is Hard



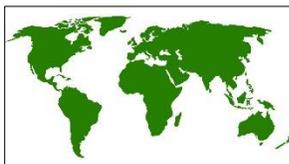
< Luke 6:27-38 >

²⁷ "But I say to you that listen, **Love your enemies**, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ **Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ 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."

It's easy to love those who love you. As, Jesus pointed out, we can all do that! But **love your enemies?** That is harder! It is when being a follower of Jesus becomes difficult.



American's enemies might be listed as Russia, North Korea and Iran along with ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). But, those countries are so far away, and I do not know any of those enemies individually. And I am sure that there are many wonderful people living in those countries, so perhaps I can cross my fingers, grit my teeth, and say, yes Jesus, okay, I'll love my enemies.



But if I go to the dictionary and look up the word enemy, then I come with definitions like this one: **a person who hates or opposes another person and tries to harm that person.** Who hates you? Who opposes you? Who is harming you? I think if we

are honest, we all have people who fall into these categories. People that we hate and do not love. We can think about our political enemies or opponents. We can think about bullies. We can think about those who talk negatively about us who criticize us behind our backs or spread malicious lies.

There's a story that I read this week about a priest who asked his congregation to put their hands up if they had any enemies. The hands went up. And then the priest asked if anyone did not have any enemies. Just one elderly man put his hand up. The delighted priest responds, "What a wonderful Christian life you lead! And tell us all how it is that you have no enemies." The man replies, "I'm 98 years old. I have no enemies. They have all died!"¹



In this week of the Special General Conference, as those in support of our LGBTQ siblings face off against our "traditionalist" siblings who are in opposition it is so easy for us to treat each other as enemies. Each accuses the other of trying to destroy the church. Our LGBTQ siblings and their families are being hurt and harmed as they are made to feel like they are not God's beloved children.

When we are feeling angry and not at all loving towards each other, what can we do? It is not easy to love someone that you hate. The person who has wronged you. The person who brought tragedy into your life. The person who wants to hurt you. Yet that is what Jesus is asking us to do. How can we do that? How do we take Jesus' message to heart to love our enemies?

First, Jesus tells us not to use force against our enemies even if they have used some sort of force against us. We heard read in Luke 6:29, ²⁹ *If anyone **strikes you on the cheek**, offer the other also; and from anyone ho **takes away your coat** do not withhold even your shirt.*

There's a similar passage in Matthew 5:38-41 where Jesus puts it this way:
³⁸ *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* ³⁹ *But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;* ⁴⁰ *and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;* ⁴¹ *and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*



⁵The OT instruction of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth was to limit revenge that could be exacted for a crime. Justice could be served only to the extent that the crime permitted. A violent resistance was permissible as long as it did not escalate the issue.

¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-james-martin-sj/how-to-love-your-enemies_b_841538.html



There's a joke that says: An eye for an eye makes everyone pirates! But perhaps a more realistic statement would be: An eye for an eye leaves the world blind.



- If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.
- If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

But Jesus does not advocate for a violent resistance. He advocated for a different form of resistance. He said instead use **non-violent resistance**.

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Hitting with back of right hand = authority and dominance. You can't hit the other cheek with the back of the hand. There's a choice. Either use the left hand, but the left hand was used for unclean purposes so could not be used to strike with. Or use the open hand or fist, but that was a sign or statement of equality. SO persecuted person was effectively demanding equality.

If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. Offer cloak as well means taking off your undergarment/tunic and you would be naked. Being naked brought shame for the viewer, not for naked one. SO persecuted person humiliates the oppressor.

If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Roman soldier was only allowed to force you to carry his stuff one mile. If you offered to go 2 miles, then the soldier was risking being in trouble, or would have to wrestle you to get his pack back. SO persecuted person forces oppressor to break law

Jesus is not advocating passive acceptance of violence or mistreatment, he advocates for a non-violent protest.² This provided the foundation for both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi's political protests. And you will likely see some of these tactics this week at General Conference.



The **Second** point I hear in today's scripture is Jesus saying. **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**

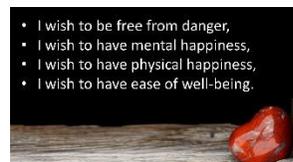
Pray, he says. Pray for the one who hurts you. Prayer changes us. It is hard to pray for someone that we don't like much. But the more we pray for good things to happen to that person the more our hearts are changed until one day we realize that we are looking at that person differently.

MLK's said "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that." The rest of the quote says: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

² Borg, Marcus. http://www.dharmagates.com/other_cheek.html (accessed January 26, 2014).

In seminary, we were taught that we understand our own faith better the more we learn about the faith of others. I took a class on Buddhist meditation. And I think they have a really good practice that help us.

To cultivate love for all beings the Buddhists do a meditation called **Loving Kindness meditation**. Buddhists believe that it is possible to change who we will be in the future by what we do in the present. We cannot make certain feelings happen, but through systematically cultivating loving kindness, by using meditation to plant a seed of powerful intention in the mind now, then the seed will bear fruit in its own time in the



future; our work is to plant the seeds, and then to trust the laws of nature.³ By constant practice, patience and perseverance, little by little, hearts can be opened and grow in love.

The meditation is practiced by repeating four phrases that we wish for ourselves. Phrases can be chosen as appropriate, but the traditional phrases are: *I wish to be free from danger, I wish to have mental happiness, I wish to have physical happiness, I wish to have ease of well-being*. The practice begins with wishing them on oneself. Then the same four phrases are used for others, gradually widening the circle: benefactor, friend, neutral (store clerk, mailman), difficult person (easy to hard), all



beings. Love for your enemies can begin with a simple phrase wished to yourself: the Buddhists call it meditation; we call it prayer.

As you listen to the news and feel your anger rising this week, what steps are you going to take? One step that you can take this week is to pray for your enemies. You can pray using this method I have just described. Or you can use an extemporaneous prayer or some of the prayers that you will find on the [umcprays](http://umcprays.org) website.⁴ But let's start to love our enemies by praying for them. What one thing will you commit to do or praying this week?



I want to finish this morning with a poem that acknowledges that love is hard. Poem written back in 2014 by Presbyterian minister Mark Sandlin entitled *Thoughts on Love on Valentine's Day*. Although it was written for Valentine's Day, I hear it speaking to all types of love, including towards our enemies.⁵

*Love is easy –
is one of the biggest myths
of our day and age.
If love were easy,
we'd war no more.*

*If love were easy,
humans would no longer
starve to death.
If love were easy,
homeless folks*

³ Steve Weissman and Rosemary Weissman. *Meditation, Compassion & Lovingkindness: An Approach to Vipassana Practice* (York Beach, Me.: Samuel Weiser, 1996), xi.

⁴ <https://umcprays.org/>

⁵ Mark Sandlin, "Thoughts on Love on Valentine's Day" in *Patheos Blog: The God Article* (February 15, 2014). <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thegodarticle/2014/02/thoughts-on-love-on-valentines-day-3/>

wouldn't freeze to death
while our government devises
new ways to give money
to the rich.
Why should it be easy?
What value
would it have
were it easy?
What worth
would it convey
on those whom we love
if it came easy,
cost us nothing?
It hurts.
It's frustrating.
It takes effort.
It requires much.
It sacrifices things
we'd rather not sacrifice.
Love is the most unselfish thing
you can do.
It is a gift
when you give it
away.
It is not the things printed
in a Hallmark card.
The beauty in love
is what it teaches us.
When we are willing
to risk real love –
to let our lives
be about love –
to be the love.
Love teaches us:
that the struggle
we perceived
was erroneous;
that the frustration
we felt
was built on
false premises and
self-centered expectations;
that the effort required
came from our own
resistance;
that the sacrifices made

were only sacrifices
because we allowed
them to be.
Love is tangled.
Love is complete
when it is reciprocal...
but in a way
that has no expectations.
The fullness of love
is found in the simplicity
of it's complexity.
Simple because
it is given with no requirements.
Complex because
it is so damned difficult to give
at times.
In those rare moments
when you find a place
of real love in your life,
you realize it is a risky
place to be.
Until those around you
join you there,
you can be hurt
because you've made
love more important than
achievement,
control,
success,
accumulation...
that which the world
deems valuable.
So, it is hard to stay there –
in a place of complete love.
Few do.
I envy them.
I think it is a good envy.
Love is worth it.
Love is the only thing
that gives real meaning
to life.
Love is the only thing
that gives real meaning.
Love is the only thing.
Love is.

And so, especially as we go through this week with the Special General Conference, let us ponder how we are going to love our enemies. As Jesus says, ²⁷ *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,* ²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* ³¹ *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* ³⁶ *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* Love is hard. Being a disciple is hard. Together, may we grow in faith.

Thanks be to God!
Amen.

Let us pray ...

O Giver of prayer that groans within us, teach us to pray for our enemies. Their names are many, and we whisper some of them now before you in our hearts. <pause>. Be with them, guard them from harm, and guide them in the way of your light. Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you, God, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Resources

Salzberg, Sharon. *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995.