

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

February 20, 2022, The 7th Sunday of Epiphany

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 Luke 6:27-38

YOU THAT LISTEN

Do you remember as a child, sticking your fingers in your ears and shouting “I can’t hear you, nana, nana, nana” to that other child, or your parents, or a teacher who was saying exactly what you didn’t want to hear? Now you may have waited until you were around the corner from your parents or teacher, but I would guess many of us had that experience as children.

As I spent time with this passage from Luke this week I wondered if Jesus’ disciples wanted to put their fingers in their ears and say, “oh no, I’m not going to listen to this one...this is just too hard!”

Because this morning’s reading from Luke asks an awful lot of those of us who have committed our lives to following Jesus.

“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...Do to others as you would have them do to you...love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return...do not judge...do not condemn...forgive...give.”

I once heard a preacher say that there are those sermons where you just want to duck as you listen, so that the words sail past you and smack into the person sitting behind you.

He also said that the sermons that are really meant for us are the ones where we find ourselves thinking, so-and-so really needs to hear these words. They need to learn about loving the unlovable, doing good to the bad ones, blessing those who curse...They really need to understand the Golden Rule.

As I’ve spent time with this morning’s reading from Luke, I’ve been thinking about those first followers of Jesus who hear these words. I’ve also been thinking about us this morning, and wondering how many of us really wish we could just stick our fingers in our ears and shout:

“I can’t hear you Jesus, tell those teachings to someone else!”

Now I’d guess that most of us can say that the “Golden Rule” holds words that are important to live by. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

But then there is that person that cuts us off in traffic.

Or our child, our spouse, or partner starting that argument all over again, and you are pretty sure you can say what they are going to say word for word.

There is the person with 23 items in their grocery cart in the 12 items or less line and you are late for your next appointment.

And did I mention the in-laws?

Plus, there is the boss, or co-worker, who takes annoying to a whole new level.

And maybe you have that sister or brother who knows exactly how to get on your last nerve...and you can’t even count how many times they’ve done it before,

And what about the mean kids at school, the cyber bullies, who never get caught?

And that’s before you even begin to think about the people you’ve disagreed with about the election, masks, vaccinations, and all the other realities of the last 2 years.

Did Jesus really mean “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you,” for those people?

Is Jesus really asking us to choose love when our co-worker's cheating or lying leads to our demotion, or loss of retirement funds?

What about when our neighbor borrows something and returns it broken, or says something so hideously untrue about us, and other people in the neighborhood believe it?

What about the friend who betrayed us, and convinced others to go along with them in the betrayal?

Did Jesus really mean "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?"

Did he really mean for us to live like this,
or were these just some nice suggestions he made one day?

What about that person who instantly came to mind for you when you heard Jesus ask you to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you?

Because my guess is that many of us know exactly who Jesus is asking us to love and pray for and forgive. It often isn't the stranger in the grocery line or in traffic,
but the person who is inside our front door at the end of the day,
the co-worker in the next cubicle,
the student in the next desk,
the person who used to be close to our heart.

Being people of faith, who choose to follow Jesus asks a lot of us.
It asks us to love as we have been loved by God.

God who loves us unconditionally.

Yes **us**, with all the good, the bad, the ugly inside of us, and the lovable and unlovable,
that makes up who we are.

Jesus doesn't ask us to be nice people, Jesus asks us to be people who choose the path Jesus walked, the path of real self-giving love.

It probably would be easier to stick our fingers in our ears at this point, instead of being the people who listen to what Jesus is saying!

Because if we are going to be people who love, forgive, don't judge and are generous without expecting anything back in return, then we are really going to need some help, aren't we?

The good news is that Jesus, who asks us to use this kind of radical love, is the very one who promises to help us as we work to become more and more like him.

If we had to live the Golden Rule by our own strength, creativity, intelligence and kindness alone we'd all be in a lot of trouble.

The promise of God's love is that God walks with us as we learn, and then relearn and then learn again, to love the unlovable, loan to the asking, and not hate the haters and enemies, and those who curse us.

And yes, the life of faith takes practice. We don't decide to live the Golden Rule one day and the rest of our life is easy! Living the life of faith takes practice, and for most of us that is practice all the days of our lives.

As followers of Jesus we are being asked to see others the way God sees us, as beloved children of God. The path to loving, blessing and praying for those who don't offer those things to us, at all, is to let ourselves know that shocking news that God loves them.

Yes **them**, those people who came instantly to mind when Jesus said to you: "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Those are the very people that God loves, and the very people we are called to love.

Now I want to step away for a moment from how these words from Luke 6 are challenging us, to speak about the times these words should never be given to another person.

Through the years Christians and the church have done great damage by using these words about turning the other cheek and praying for abusers to send battered women back to their abusers. These words have been spoken to rape victims and survivors of childhood abuse, and survivors violence and trauma to call victims to care for those who are hurting them, or return to those who are abusing them.

These words were never intended to ask those who aren't safe in their own homes, or in their relationships to turn the other cheek and forgive and love. These words are not a call to let abuse continue in God's name. All people deserve to be safe, every day.

Our call as people of faith, is to walk beside brave survivors of violence to make sure that they are safe day by day. It is in their own journey with God, in their own timing, that they will or will not find ways to pray for their abusers. It is never up to us to tell them how to pray. We are called to be the listening ear of love, not the judging voice of false faith. Because violence at home and in relationships is never what God intends. We are called to pray for them, not tell them how to pray.

And now back to those of us to whom Jesus is speaking in Luke 6. In this long season in our culture when people are labelled by how they are different from us, and divided from us,

and how they think and vote, and mask and vaccinate, or don't,

Jesus invites us to love, as he has loved us.

Jesus invites us to see everyone, absolutely everyone as a child of God.

Jesus asks us to choose his culture of love, even when it seems to go against the way a lot of the world lives.

Faith in Jesus is often counter-cultural!

Is the life of faith easy? NO! not always.

Does the life of faith ask us to change? Yes, it often does.

Sometimes it really would be easier to stick our fingers in our ears and shout "I can't hear you!" But Jesus' voice of love invites us, always invites us, to walk the pathway with him.

Yes, it's challenging, but we are being called to give away the mercy, the grace and the love that have been given to us, over and over again.

And don't you long for more grace and love and mercy in this era of great unrest and division. Don't you long for less hate and more love, less division and more forgiveness, less cursing and more praising, less judgment and more acceptance?

We who follow Jesus are called to be the ones who live out the many things we long for.

It is up to us in these divided days, to live out the grace and mercy
and counter-cultural love of God

right into the midst of the world where we are living,

with the people with whom we are living, and working and going to school.

With God's grace we can be sharers of that counter-cultural love.

I'd like to end with a quote written on the wall in Mother Teresa's home for children in Calcutta,
based on a composition by Kent Keith. It reads:

http://prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm

“People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.”

Amen.