

Calvary United Methodist Church
February 24, 2019

BUT, LORD—I DON'T WANT TO LOVE MY ENEMY!

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Children's Message:

Luke 6:27-38

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2019 SERMON

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE:

I'll ask that our kids come forward. And good morning! Come a little closer here.

So, you will meet people in life who are kind of irritating. But yet, there is something about them that is still good. I've had a friend like that who was another pastor and he had a lot to offer; you just had to choose to like him because sometimes he could be kind of like nails on a chalkboard, if you have ever heard that sound. Have you ever heard that sound? Do they have chalkboards anymore? Smart boards now, that doesn't work, right?

So, what do you do when you meet somebody who is irritating? Hmm... Well, this is what irritating people are like and nice people are like. Would you like to just sit here with me? Ok, come up here. Hold this like it's a teddy bear. Doesn't that feel nice and soft? It does feel nice and soft. That's when a person is really nice and you love them, like your sister, right? Yeah, and you just sort of enjoy being together and kind of hold them close, right? Ok, so we'll pass this around now.

Now, hold that close. Is that a little rougher? A little bit. Yeah. You don't want to hold it as close, right? Sometimes like your sister, right? But they are both beautiful pieces, you know, this is a really nice piece and I got this from South America some years ago and it's a beautiful piece of wool, but it's just scratchy, right? Some people are like that; they are kind of scratchy and irritating and itchy, but they have a beauty and God loves them too, so what do you do?

Well, Jesus talked about loving your enemies and doing good to those who don't like you, so this is what you do, right? When they go low, you go high, right? Why don't we say it together? When they go low, we go high. Right? When they go low, we go high. That means that you always do the right thing, because it is more about you than about them; that if you are mean and nasty to them and they've been mean and nasty to you, it just keeps going, right? But if they are mean and nasty, you treat them right.

Sometimes loving people just means respecting them and treating them better than they deserve. So, when they go low, we go... (Up.) Up...high. It's the right concept either way. And that's how we can honor Jesus when he says, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate

you.”

And there’s an illustration he gives. So, back then they had Roman soldiers everywhere. They occupied the land and they weren’t very nice. And it was a law that if you were there and they said, “Carry my backpack,” which would weigh between sixty and eighty pounds you had to carry it for one mile. What did Jesus say? “Carry it two miles and then say, ‘Have a nice day.’” Really plays with their minds.

But that’s how you deal with irritating people. You treat them nice because you are nice. You go high when they go low. Good? Okay. Will you do this for your sister? Say yes. That’s what I thought.

Let’s pray: Thank you, Lord, for our kids and, yes, we meet irritating people, but help us not to be irritating in response but to show your love and your light through our eyes, in school and at home and everywhere we go. Amen.

Message:

And would you join me in a word of prayer? Lord, help us. These are hard words for us and they aren’t natural to us, but they are natural to everyone in your kingdom. So, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

You really won’t understand what Jesus means by forgiving your enemies until you understand the psychology of an oppressed people. Until then you will just pretend it’s not there, you’ll dismiss it, you’ll gloss over it. But it really is essential teaching of Jesus and it really does apply to you and to me. So I don’t stand here saying, “I got this.” I stand here saying, like you, “I struggle with this.”

But let’s go back to the psychology of oppression. Israel in the 1st century was a land that was oppressed from within and from without. The romans were not the first to conquer and oppress the people of Israel, but they were very good at it. It was a business for them. They believed that to rule you must be strong; to be strong you must exert power; to exert power you must show them who is the boss and if you must be merciless, you be merciless. If you want peace, there must be war and Rome must win. That’s Pax Romana.

Now, any roman soldier, as I said to the children, had the power to press you into a detail, whether it was to carry their pack, carry a bucket of water, be drafted to do whatever they needed you to do. And you had to do that for one mile. If you resisted, very likely you would be clubbed. You might get a backhanded slap like that; that was a very common roman thing. They might arrest you. You might likely be caned, imprisoned, made a slave, no Habeas Corpus.

Now, the Romans also taxed the people heavily, about 70%. That’s a pretty high tax rate.

Taxes were collected by locals who were called publicans and they always employed a squad of goons and the goons would come up, they would have a whole gang of them. They would go to your village, go house to house. You had to pay the tax. If you didn't have the money, they would take what belonged to you. If you resisted, they might go to your olive grove, but down all your trees. They might take the wheat you had in your granary or the barley. They might do anything they might do. If they found a woman by herself or maybe even with you if they were that kind of people, they might beat you, rape your wife, your daughter or worse. And this is real. This is part of oppression. It goes on today. And they would leave you hurting and at the edge of starvation.

Now, wealthier Israelites also followed Roman models. They had power, but they also wanted to acquire large estates and they wanted to employ servants and slaves and how did they get these? Well, they loaned money to subsistence farmers. It was very typical from the times of the Exodus when they moved into Israel that they would be given about five acres of land. On that five acres, a family could live for generations. You might even see this in Proverbs. It says: Remove not the ancient landmark. That was a stone that was a boundary stone. And if you had to loan your farm out because of nonpayment or something, at the year of Jubilee, every 7 years they had a year of rest, and at seven times seven, the 50th year, the 49th year, it was a Jubilee and all those lands would be given back to the people and all the debts would be forgiven. But now not so. They would foreclose early on the loans. They would take these estates, displacing these people. This led to poverty, to homelessness, loss of dignity. So, oppressed by the Romans and oppressed by their own people, Israel was an impossible place to live in the 1st century.

So what is the psychology of the oppressed? Well, it finds a couple of expressions and one of is submissive humiliation or seething anger seeking expression. The submissive gave up as powerless: there is nothing we can do against the system that is designed to make us less than human, steal what we have. We can't do anything about it. Some would leave their land, some would be made slaves, some would just take to drink. One of the big crops was barley. What do you think they did with barley and a couple of other ingredients? So they had all that. That's what they did. But others seethed with anger and they found expression in partisan groups like the Zealots. They were an armed terrorist group, fomenting rebellion underground, staging guerilla attacks on the Herodian soldiers and the Roman soldiers. But every time they did that, the Romans would come back with a devastating attack. They might completely wipe out an entire village, slaughter or enslave everybody. Completely destroy it. Not that only led to a deeper hatred of the enemy to recruiting more sons to join the zealots.

A Roman soldier would rarely trust a local, much less befriend one. There is an example in the Bible of a Roman soldier, a centurion coming to Jesus asking that his servant be healed, but that's rare. What they expected was public respect, submission, obedience on the spot. But a local would never trust a Roman, much less welcome one into their house in friendship. What they prayed for was a day when God would raise up a Messiah to kill off the whole lot

of them and set Israel free. They rejoiced when a Roman died. That made them happy. So now they are in a cycle which is impossible to break. But it's not so difficult to see that cycle repeating in our day in many places.

So, Jesus comes into the public eye after being baptized by John in the Jordan. Now, even John's baptisms were a subversive attack on the spiritual leadership of the nation because they were charging exorbitant fees to go into the temple to be washed, to go and do your sacrifices. So they went to the Jordan and John did it for free. He was really undercutting all that stuff. So when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, it was really a radical act. He was in effect rejecting the spiritual leadership of the nation, declaring now that there is another way and he was going to share this way so that people could claim their heritage as the people of God.

So, he began this ministry that ran counter to what everyone thought or believed or wanted. And sometimes even the disciples said: we don't know what he's doing. When Jesus is taking seriously about what is going to happen, Peter rebukes him and Jesus says, "Get behind me. You are of Satan, not of God." So what he is doing is trying to break the cycle of violence that seems so impossible to break. He's trying to break the cycle that only leads to death and so he invites his disciples to do something paradoxical and Christianity is always paradoxical. He invites his disciples to be generously compassionate and forgiving as their father in heaven is generously compassionate and forgiving.

And in the examples that Jesus gave, disciples are not to retaliate, but instead to do something actually good to their attacker. Now, why is this so? I mean it is a pretty radical idea. Why should you be generous to your oppressor who is taking the bread out of your mouth and the land from under your feet? Well, I know what we would do in America. You do too. We'd break out the guns, we'd swear revenge, we'd kill the enemy. Well, you saw that. We were schooled by that, many of us, as we watched the cowboy movies from the 1930s and 40s and 50s and then those crazy 50s movies, you know, with all these revenge themes in them and more in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, you know like Billy Jack in the 1970s; Jean-Claude Van Damme, right? You know, Schwarzenegger saying: I'll be back. Right? All that stuff. It's been reinforced by video games. When we did the training earlier this month, Officer Cook who was with us, Corporal Cook, said that he believed that video games were the cause of a lot of the violence that seeks expression in the gun violence around America. That is something to think about. You would not train your child to shoot somebody but by allowing them to have video games, it's exactly what you are doing. That's what he said and I think that he's right. Why is it that we think that the world will be a better place if all our enemies are dead? If you are Jewish in this time, a terrorist is your friend. What's one man's terrorist is another man's friend. And vice versa. So you see this cycle.

So, you've already heard the test: Love your enemies. Don't resist evil people. Be good to such; pray for them. If someone hits you on the right cheek, give them the left. If someone sues you for your shirt, give them your coat. If someone forces you to carry a bucket of wa-

ter on the past for a mile, carry it two. Give to those who beg. Instead of hating your enemies, love them, pray for them, do good for them, be compassionate to your enemies, even as your Heavenly Father is compassionate to you. Be immeasurably forgiving to your enemies and God will be immeasurably forgiving to you as well.

So what do these words mean, to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to not resist evil, to offer the other cheek? I mean, do they mean that we should be doormats? Here's the real thing about this: revenge continues the cycle of violence and vengeance. It doesn't stop. And submission is humiliating and it depersonalizes and strips the individual of their dignity, their God-given dignity. So what turns all of this around?

Don't miss this because this is so central to Jesus and to everyone who follows him: Jesus came to bring to the Kingdom of God down to earth. And the Kingdom of God brings the full light of day, exposing our world and all of its sin-sick business and cycles unto death. The light of God's kingdom shows you the way God wants you to be, to be human. This is a new way to be human, no longer as the attacker, no longer as the victim, but instead infused with God's life-giving Spirit, we rise to the dignity of our full humanity.

So, to the Roman soldier who demanded that you carry his eighty pound field pack for the required mile, you say: Sure, and I'll go the extra mile. Instead of spitting in the face of your enemy and wishing them dead, you pray that they might be a better human being, as God's Spirit convicts them. To the beggar who asks and you give, asking nothing in return but trusting that in your kindness they might see the goodness of God to them that your mercy points the way to the father, who is as merciful to them as God is to you. The slap that they give was meant to demonstrate your weakness and your power. By offering the other cheek, they have to look you in the eye and see you as a human being.

You see what Jesus is doing? He's changing all the dynamics of who to live this life. We are going to live this life by the standards of the world which will end in death. We are going to live this life by the Kingdom of God, which is the only Kingdom that will last. So, do you see what Jesus is getting at? He is changing the world, because God's Kingdom is the only Kingdom that will last through time and eternity. You enter it and live by it and everything God has is yours. Reject it and what is left is simply to live in a world that is marching to its own destruction. Gain it and it is heaven. Reject it and what is left is hell. Do you see this? This is the most important teaching of Jesus and then he showed us with his own life what it looks like. It's not easy. You need God's Spirit to help you do this. I can't do it on my own and neither can you, but God's Spirit is in us to do this.

So, the Kingdom of God has broken into our world; it's broken into our lives; it's broken into your life and it's changed us and Jesus expects that you and I will live by this Kingdom and the values of this Kingdom just as he did. Fortunately he gives us a lot of time to learn it, because I'm still working on it after all these decades.

But look, if you meet evil with evil, blow for blow, the cycle of vengeance will never end. We'll never get out of places like Afghanistan, places in the Middle East. But Jesus has come to take us to a better way of being human, to be human made in the image of God. And even the people you can't stand, the image of God is in them. What Wesley believed wasn't that it was completely absent, it was effaced like if you efface the image of...who is on the quarter? Is that Jefferson? Look at a quarter and tell me later. I think it's Jefferson. Anyway you efface that but when Jesus comes to do is restamp that image of God within our souls.

So, the Kingdom of God has come to you and me shining as a light in this darkness. This is our best hope in an otherwise hopeless world. In fact, our only hope. Amen.