

Sermon: Judge Not

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

24 February 2019

Based on **Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40, Luke 6:27-38**

We recall from last week that Jesus is speaking on the level, eye to eye, to those that listen. Our job today is to get within earshot, so to speak, because these are not easy lessons to hear. Even though Jesus is not teaching passive acceptance of our fate, he is presenting a dilemma not easily solved. As sinners, we know all too well how easy it is to respond in kind yet exchanging an eye for an eye leaves everyone half blind.

What we want to hear from Jesus, what we come to church to learn, is how to apply his now 2,000-year-old teachings to our current situation. So, when he says, ‘*love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you,*’ we instinctively pull back a bit. For anyone who has ever been abused, it’s a difficult ask to pray for the abuser. If Jesus were standing here today, we might well ask him, ‘Have you read the news lately?’

As always, it’s all about context: Jesus’ context, Luke’s, and our own. Jesus is teaching on the Plain in a dangerous time, in an occupied country. Luke’s Christian community is marginalized and experiencing persecution. The enemies Jesus and Luke refer to are actual enemies, not business competitors or rival sports teams; they are flesh-and-blood oppressors and persecutors.

Jesus’ teachings usually build on something familiar, as in the parables that start out with a known situation and then suddenly turn into something else. Here, he’s counting on people knowing that if someone strikes you on the cheek and you offer the other also, if that person wanted to hit you again, he would have to use his backhand, which is a cowardly and shameful thing to do.

In Jesus’ time, chances were good that the one doing the hitting would be a Roman soldier, so offering your other cheek becomes an act of non-violent civil disobedience. In Luke’s time, a slap on the face was part of the excommunication ritual for those getting kicked out of the synagogue for being members of a radical sect.

Jesus also knew that the one most likely to take your coat and possibly the shirt off your back would be the tax collector if you fell behind in paying your rent, tithes, or taxes. For a group of people with little or no social standing, these are real-life situations and Jesus bases the teaching that comes next on those situations.

Forty years or so ago, during the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, a priest named Ernesto Cardenal recorded the reflections of a group of people who lived in an island community in Lake Nicaragua called Solentiname.

Every Sunday, the group would gather, read the day's Gospel lesson, and talk about it. In their situation, living in the midst of a revolution, they saw the effects of persecution and injustice up close every day. Little by little, the community began to identify with the rebels and the group eventually became part of the resistance to Somoza. For them divided loyalties gave way to total commitment. More than a few involuntarily became martyrs. They were quite familiar with persecution and injustice.

After they heard the passage we read today, there was a long silence followed by a lengthy discussion, during which some people moved from confusion to understanding, or from anger to clarity, but everyone gained insight and understanding.

When the discussion began, the group's collective attitude was Us vs. Them. Oscar's wife Andrea said, 'We answer evil with evil! When they insult us, we insult back!' But everyone agreed that within the group, they did not insult each other, only those outside the group.

Father Ernesto said that we cannot have hatred in God's kingdom, so we are commanded to love our enemies. But William asked, 'Even *class* enemies?' Ernesto said that as long as we have class divisions with opposed interests, we'll have class enemies, so the struggle is to unite humanity and to do it for love. Ernesto recalled that once a Marxist priest in Chile said to him that 'Only love is *revolutionary*; hatred is always *reactionary*.'

Manuel said, 'But we *have* class enemies...how are we going to struggle against the enemy if we have to love him? How are we going to defend ourselves?' Marcelino said, *slowly*, 'If we hate, we are no longer struggling against the enemy – *we* are the enemy...Jesus says we must love the enemy, but he doesn't say we can't fight them.'

Then the question became, how to fight them. If they hate, then the weapon used against them must be love. And that's when the transformation began to happen. They spoke for a long time about all of this, and at one point, Father Ernesto said that Jesus' words have often been understood in a *reactionary* way, but now he believed that the only correct way of understanding them is the *revolutionary* way, the way of love.

So, is this what Jesus is trying to get across to us? We know that *justice* means getting what one deserves, and that *mercy* means getting what one does not deserve, both of which mean to me, be careful what you pray for.

But when Jesus says, 'Do not judge,' he doesn't mean mind your own business; he doesn't mean don't get involved. He means for us to bring God's mercy, love, and forgiveness to the greater community, which is what the people in Solentiname did, even though it cost them in the short term.

In return, Jesus promised 'a good measure,' which is an amply-filled basket, for what we give is what we get back: love for love, and God's abundance.

We are to do unto others not as they have already done to us, but as we would have them do unto us.¹ If we do have enemies, it might do to ask ourselves why. Have we turned a blind eye to someone's complaint? Have we not been as generous or neighborly as we thought we had been? Have we been willing to listen to their side of the story too? If so, that's one more wall we can tear down.

The psalmist wrote, 'Do not fret because of the wicked, for they will soon fade like the grass.' 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord' (Deuteronomy 32:35), and that theme runs throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Hebrews.²

Jesus teaches us here to trust in God, to commit our way to God, to be responsible for our behavior, and to not let others dictate our lives for us. He teaches a revolutionary way, and not a reactionary way. God's grace transforms us, little by little, as we navigate a narrow and difficult path.

Amen.

¹ John L. Hamilton

² Genesis 4:23; Exodus 32:34; Psalm 94:1; Nahum 1:2; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30