

Luke 6:27-38 On the Other Side of Grace

February 24, 2019

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

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."

Last Monday night, I went to church. I was attending the Samuel D. Proctor Conference, a Black Theology Conference, which was meeting this year in Birmingham. The theme was "The Cry of Black Blood," and the opening night worship was at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The service began with singing the Black National Anthem.

The Black National Anthem is in our hymnal as “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and I love that song. It makes the hairs stand up on my arms. But I always wonder if I have a right to sing it. “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,” the song says. “We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.”

There we were, in that place that was anointed with the very literal blood of the four little girls who were slaughtered in the 1963 bombing. And while Sam and I were not the only White people there, we were very much in the minority. All around us were people whose ancestors had trod, or they, themselves, had trod, their path through the blood of the slaughtered. The church shook with the power of the singing.

But I was aware that my ancestors had trod a very different path.

The stories I know of my forebears are mostly on my mother’s side, because some of my family members have traced it back generations. That branch was all northerners. And while I know that it wasn’t just the South that was involved in the history of slavery—the whole nation was complicit, and the entire economy was built upon the cheap labor of enslaved African-Americans--still, I had found some comfort in knowing that my ancestors were not, at least, actual slaveholders. My great-great-great grandfather fought in the Union Army, was captured and held as a

Prisoner of War at Andersonville. Though he survived, he came home with his health broken.

On the other hand, with my father's family, there is very little talk of genealogy. I don't even know the names of my great-grandparents on that side. Which leads me to believe that that is the side with the more interesting stories.

Recently, though, I remembered one bit of family history that I had forgotten. Back when I was in high school, studying American History, my aunt mentioned that my father's father's side was descended from Henry Clay. I haven't verified that, but Henry Clay was such a mid-level figure of history that I don't see any reason for anyone to make it up. If they said we were descended from Napoleon or Alexander the Great, I'd be doing some fact-checking! But Henry Clay is someone that, for most people, you actually have to explain who he was.

Henry Clay was from Kentucky. He served as the Speaker of the House of Representatives during the early decades of the 1800's. Among his many accomplishments was the passage of the Missouri Compromise in 1820. At a time when the country was ready to blow apart over the issue of slavery, the Missouri Compromise held it together awhile longer, until, of course, four decades later, when Civil War couldn't be avoided any longer. In other words, Henry Clay's work bought African-Americans another forty years of slavery.

And Clay, himself was a slaveholder until his death. In his will, he gave the African-Americans he held captive, their freedom.

There's a story in the Book of Second Samuel in which David has a holy encounter with God on a threshing floor. He then tries to buy the threshing floor from its owner so that he can build an altar there in gratitude, and the owner tries to just give it to him. David, though, insists on paying, because, he says, "I will not offer to God a sacrifice that costs me nothing." (2 Samuel 24:24). Henry Clay twice made sacrifices that cost him nothing.

First, he brokered a compromise that cost him nothing, but cost millions of slaves everything.

Then, he gave "his" slaves their freedom *in his will*. If you are conflicted enough about slavery to feel that the human beings you are holding ought to be free, you free them *then*, not after you no longer have any use for them.

That was my ancestor. But Monday night, I was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with people whose ancestors had sacrificed everything for their freedom; in a place in which four children had everything stolen from them by people who looked like me. But we were singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," together, and nobody

suggested to me that I shouldn't. Nobody suggested that I couldn't be part of the "we" in that song.

Today's passage in Luke is a particularly difficult one. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek when we've been struck. I had planned, until Monday night, on preaching about how hard it is for any of us to do those things. And it *is* hard, no question about it. But Monday night got me thinking: how often is each one of us on the other side of the equation? Whether in the context of race, or in some other context, how often are *we* the enemy? How often are *we* the ones who strike the first blow—either physically or psychologically?

And how often are *we* the ones who stand on the other side of grace, receiving love and forgiveness that we have in no way earned, from people who have every right to hate us?

Now, I need to digress for a minute, because this passage in Luke, like the similar passage in Matthew, has too-often been used to tell people that they should stay in abusive situations--that it's the Christian thing to just let people beat you and take everything from you. *That* is not what Jesus is saying. *That is* not what Jesus is saying. *That is not* what Jesus is saying. Not only do you *not* have to continue to take abuse, but to allow another person to continue to perpetuate abuse

unchallenged, is unloving to them; because every blow they strike diminishes *their* humanity.

I'm very grateful to the theologian Walter Wink for contextualizing these sayings of Jesus to show that, within the cultural norms of Jesus' time, turning the other cheek or giving your shirt were not submissive acts: these were subversive acts. So, for example: if an oppressor struck you, it would have been with the left hand, which was the hand reserved for inferiors. But if you, then, turned the other cheek, you were daring them to hit you with their right hand, which was the hand reserved for an equal.

The other commands he gave—to give away your shirt if they take your coat; to refrain from asking for things back when they are taken from you—were similarly subversive. They didn't perpetuate abuse: they shook up the dynamic. Suddenly, the oppressed is no longer a cowering victim; instead, without lifting a hand, they are implicitly demanding that the abuser acknowledge their full humanity.

You might recognize the strategy. It's the same strategy that was used on the streets of Birmingham at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The strategy that stood firm but did not strike back in the face of bombs and dogs and fire hoses. The strategy that forced White Americans to acknowledge the humanity and the rights of Black Americans.

The people who marched and knelt and faced the fire hoses: those are my heroes—they always have been, even though I can't claim their suffering or their courage as my own. So I stood there at Sixteenth Street Baptist in my White skin, singing, "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died. Yet, with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our parents sighed?" I sang it, even though my ancestors were on the other side of the chastening rod. I sang it, and nobody looked at me like I shouldn't.

It isn't a comfortable thing to stand on the other side of grace. To offer grace is to be in the position of power. To receive grace is to be powerless. But often, it takes the experience of powerlessness to save our souls. That's what Jesus' teaching does—it doesn't just affirm the humanity of the one being abused; it does so without harming the abuser, so that the possibility of redemption and reconciliation remains.

It's like those martial arts that are based, not on fighting back, but on yielding. They are effective because, when someone comes at you, they expect you to fight back. But if, instead, you yield, they lose their balance and fall forward, disarmed and unharmed. That's how Jesus calls us to resist-- in ways that disarm our enemies, but leave them unharmed; so that we can restore our own humanity *and*

the humanity of our enemy, and leave open the possibility that our broken human family can finally heal.

It's not an easy thing, to love our enemies. It's not an easy thing, to pray for them, to do good to them, to bless them. It's not an easy thing, to offer healing grace to the one who has wounded you. But we have all stood on the other side of that grace. We have all been its recipients.

When we were the enemies of God, God could have destroyed us. Instead, God sent Jesus to heal us. And when we pinned him to the cross and taunted him to show his power by coming down and fighting back, he refused to take the bait. Instead of returning blow for blow, he yielded—throwing us off-balance, then opening his arms to catch us.

In Christ Jesus, every one of us stands on the other side of grace. Only by offering the same to others do we all have the chance to heal.