

10.6.24

A Sign of the Kingdom of God

Luke 6.20-36

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This is the third week of our series **Reimagining the Church** in which we're going back to the New Testament and examining some of the foundational images and metaphors for who the church is and what the church is to do. So far, we've heard from Mark about being disciples of the cross and the importance of being willing to embrace suffering as a follower of Jesus as we seek to serve others rather than being served. Last week we heard from Matthew that the church is to be a household of justice and how Jesus family is not shaped by DNA but is composed of those who do the will of God. Today we turn to Luke's gospel, which I'll be reading from shortly, but first, I want to ask you to ponder some questions.

Do you have any person or group of people you consider your enemy? Who is that individual or group? For nations at war, naming the other side is an obvious answer. What is it about those you consider your enemy that causes you to feel such enmity or hatred towards them? What have they done? When you think about that person or group, how would you describe your emotions? Your thoughts? What do you wish for them? Sadly, as we approach another presidential election, some Americans, even some who call themselves Christian, would say people on the other side ideologically are their enemies and they hate or despise them, call them all kinds of names and wish them ill. Certainly, many people are speaking and acting as if that is the case. This is not helpful and it's destructive for our national life.

Jason Blakely is an associate professor of political science at Pepperdine University and the author of the book, *“Lost in Ideology: Interpreting Modern Political Life.”* Blakely encourages us to dialogue with people who disagree with us, to try and understand how someone on the other side is looking at an issue and the importance of seeking to understand the language and guiding symbols of other people. Surely, that's needed and something most of us could do more of, rather than demanding that other people to use Blake's words, *“immediately see the obvious righteousness and rationality of”* our position or view. If you think what Blakely is suggesting sounds difficult, then you may want to brace yourself because what Jesus teaches goes much farther than dialoguing with those with whom we disagree. Listen to Luke 6:27-36 where Jesus says,

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**.

Dr. Fred Craddock who was a great preacher and teacher of preaching and New Testament, said, “*It is not an overstatement to say that Luke 6:35 expresses the essence of the whole gospel.*” As followers of Christ, we’re not to react to others based on how they treat us, but to **act** according to the kingdom principles of love, forgiveness, and generosity. In Jesus’ words, Luke invites each of us individually and as a church to be a **sign of the kingdom of God; to respond to challenges by loving, doing good, blessing, praying, and giving.**

Love of enemies is one theme among many in this passage, but it’s the dominant one. It opens this section in verse 27 and the phrase is repeated at the close in verse 35. The first thing to note is **a Christian’s way of living is not to be determined by the actions of an enemy.** The passage begins in verses 27-31 with the principle that Jesus’ followers don’t reciprocate, don’t retaliate, don’t behave toward others in negative or harmful ways that we may be treated. **Act, Don’t React.** That’s what we’re called to do. Numerous examples of mistreatment are listed: hating, cursing, abusing, striking, taking, begging, pressuring one’s sense of compassion. In the face of any of these forms of mistreatment, Christians are not to respond by acting the same way.

Jesus' teaching assumes that his listeners **are victims, not victimizers**. Jesus offers no instruction here on what to do after hating, cursing, abusing, striking, taking, or pressuring another person's sense of compassion, because if one is living as a genuine disciple of Jesus and a sign of the kingdom of God, we don't treat people that way, we don't live, behave, or act that way. People who claim to be followers of Jesus who do act that way are not living under nor representing the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed and are in fact hurting the cause of Christ.

A second observation is this, followers of Jesus may be victims of this kind of behavior, but **we're not to regard ourselves as victims who are shaped by the hostility or abuse unleashed on us**. Rather, we're to take the initiative, but not by whining or complaining or by responding by behaving in a similar way. **We're not to react but to act according to the kingdom principles of love, forgiveness, and generosity**. We learn to live this way from the God we worship who Jesus says is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked (v. 35).

The first part of today's scripture closes with Luke's version of the Golden Rule (v.31), ***"Do to others as you would have them do to you."*** This teaching is also found in Matthew (7:12), and in other ancient sources including the Greek poet Homer, the Roman philosopher Seneca, and Jewish philosopher Philo. This saying is not unique to Jesus, but the universal embrace of a principle doesn't make it any less true, any less valid, or any less binding. The Golden Rule is stated positively, we're **to do to others**, which means actively taking the initiative to seek the well being and the good of the other in how we treat them, even if we consider that person an enemy. Each of us can reflect on how well we're doing that and how seriously we take this teaching of Jesus in our own lives.

The second part of the passage, verses 32-36, repeats from a different perspective the principle of the first part; **you're not to reciprocate in your response the behavior of another person. Verses 27-31 teach that our behavior is not determined by how an enemy treats us. Verses 32-36 say neither is our lifestyle determined by those who love us and do good for us**. Rather than a person hating in response to hatred and loving in response to love, Christian behavior and relationships are prompted by the God we worship who does not react but acts in love

and grace toward all. Jesus says this is what it means to be children of *“the Most High”* (v. 35). Luke’s phrase, *“for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,”* expresses Matthew’s (5:45), *“He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”* Both Jesus’ statements affirm the radical grace of God, which is what motivates God’s actions towards people, not the merit of the recipients.

Some people are offended by God’s generosity and impartiality and Jesus addresses those feelings in several of his parables including the one in Matthew 20:1-16 about the generous landowner and in Luke 15:11-32 in the response of the older brother to the party his father throws for his returned younger brother. The difficulty many of us have with God’s kindness is twofold. **First**, God behaves with kindness toward people whose way of living doesn’t merit such favor; and **second**, as this passage from Luke 6 emphasizes, **we’re called to relate to others with this same graciousness, kindness, and generosity.** God’s people don’t so often quarrel with God about how they themselves are treated as they do about how God is too generous toward others who in their eyes, “don’t deserve it.”

Luke’s gospel stresses how God is gracious to those who are on the margins of society which in the late first century included women and the poor, so it’s not surprising in Luke’s gospel that we find much about the importance of women, preferential treatment for the poor, and how hard it is for those of us who are rich to be saved. All these insights in Luke are organized around the central theme of **the kingdom of God.** There are **66** references to the kingdom of God in the New Testament, and **32** of them are in Luke’s gospel. Luke’s primary image of the church is we’re called to be **a sign of the kingdom of God** and so is each of us as a disciple.

We see signs every where we go, some of them clutter up the roadside, but if you’re somewhere you’ve never been before, if you’re lost, then a sign that helps you identify where you are or the direction you need to go is incredibly helpful. Luke says each of us is to be a sign pointing people to Jesus and the kingdom of God.

This central image of a sign of the kingdom of God in Luke means that regarding poverty and riches, the weak and the strong, inclusion and exclusion, something utterly new is happening in the world. The kingdom of God as Luke presents it from the beginning with Mary’s song in Luke 1:51-53 (NKJV) is about

reversals and the unexpected, *“He has shown strength with His arm; He has **scattered the proud** in the imagination of their hearts.*

⁵² *He has **put down the mighty** from their thrones, And **exalted the lowly.***

⁵³ *He has **filled the hungry with good things**, And **the rich** He has **sent away empty.**”*

We hear more in Luke about the appropriate Christian relationship to wealth than in the other three gospels including in some parables that are only found in Luke such as the parable of the rich fool (12:13-21) and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), as well as other encounters like the story of the rich young man (Luke 18:18-25). Over and over in Luke’s gospel the echo of the verses in 6:27-36 are shown love – even your enemies, give, be generous, share grace, be merciful. This is how we demonstrate the reality of our faith and live as a sign of the kingdom of God.

It's fitting on the Sunday that we receive the World Mission Offering to be reminded of this essential part of the message of Jesus. Living generously, giving freely, is an enjoyable and blessed way to live. As we give to support our church, our Global servants and partners around the world, we’re being a sign of the kingdom of God, we’re being bearers of the good news.

In our culture you’re somebody to the degree that you purchase and possess. Our culture says, “Blessed are those who have” and “Woe to those who have not.” But Jesus says, “**Blessed are you** who are **poor.**”

I heard a story about a bicycle race in India. The object of the race was to go the shortest distance possible within a specified time. At the start of the race, everyone cued up at the line, and when the gun sounded all the bicycles, as best they could, **stayed put**. Racers were disqualified if they tipped over or one of their feet touched the ground. And so, they would inch forward just enough to keep the bike balanced. When the time was up and another gun sounded, the person who had gone the farthest was the loser and the person closest to the starting line was the winner.

Imagine getting into that race and not understanding how the race works. When the race starts, you pedal as hard and fast as you can. You're out of breath. You're sweating. You're delighted because the other racers are back there at the starting line. You think, *this is fantastic. Don't let up. Push harder, faster, and longer.*

Finally, you hear the gun that ends the race, and you're delighted because you think you're the winner. Except you're the loser because you misunderstood how the race is run. Jesus gives us the rules to the eternal race of life. The finish line is painted on the other side of our deaths, right in front of the throne of God. There we will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. **The winning strategy for this life and for all eternity is not what many people think or expect – it's loving our enemies, being merciful as God is merciful, caring about others and not about ourselves.** It's **living and giving generously** as good stewards of all that God has trusted us to manage especially to help those who are poor and need life's necessities and the good news and hope of Jesus.

At the celebration of life service for Pat Foot yesterday, the opening hymn the family selected was Faith of Our Fathers and the closing verse may have been inspired by today's verses from Luke 6 about loving our enemies. It says, "*Faith of our fathers! We will love Both friend and foe in all our strife, And preach thee too, as love knows how, By kindly words and virtuous life. Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death!*" Imagine the impact in our nation and around the world if "taking a stand for Jesus" looked like loving our enemies, bringing good news to the poor, more food for the hungry, more advocacy for the oppressed, more compassion, more grace, more mercy, more generosity, what a sign of the kingdom of God that would be for all to see.

Closing Prayer

Gracious, merciful, and loving God, we thank you for sending Jesus to teach and show how we're to live as your children. We ask for your help, which we desperately need, to live as Jesus commanded. By your Spirit grant us the faith and courage to help us be disciples who show mercy and grace by loving even our enemies, doing good to all, blessing, praying, and giving so we may be a sign of your kingdom to the world and more lives may be transformed by the person and teaching of Jesus. In Christ's name, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Review Luke 6:27-36 and underline or circle the repeated words or phrases you find. What do you discover in doing so?
2. Of all that Jesus commands us to do in Luke 6:27-36, what do you find the most difficult or challenging? Why?
3. In verses 27 and 35, Jesus tells his disciples to "love your enemies". What does this mean in practical terms? For example, how does that impact how we view those with different political views than our own? What would it look like in terms of our speech, attitude, and behavior?
4. What does it look like to "do good to those who hate you" and "bless those who curse you"?
5. How well do you, "Do to others as you would have them do to you," in your speech, behavior, and attitude?
6. Living as Jesus did and taught requires that we **act**, rather than **react** in relationships and situations we face. What steps can you take, or habits can you cultivate if you're to be guided by the teaching of Jesus rather than your emotions or opinions?
7. Jesus invites us to respond to challenges by loving, doing good, blessing, praying, and giving. How can we do this in season and out of season? What is the reward is for doing what Jesus says in Luke 6:27-36?