

LELC Epiphany 7

There is so much in our Gospel text for today (Luke 6:27-38). We are going to take a little time to unpack it. Carefully because some parts of it (ahem, v. 29) have been mis-used over the years for some pretty rotten purposes. So let's start by setting the stage. This passage picks up where last week left off. We are in the middle of Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Last week Jesus was talking about blessings (to those who are poor and hungry) and woes (to those who are rich and haughty). One of the blessed was "blessed are you when people hate you, revile you, exclude you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man... they did the same to the prophets." You can just imagine the crowds gathered around, leaning in close, shushing the children so they could hear every word.

And then comes this: *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. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...* Matthew's version of this passage is even more explicit, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Turning the other cheek. This admonition by Jesus has been used to encourage people to stay in abusive relationships. It has been used to shame people of color for resisting oppression. It has been used to encourage passivity and submission to the bullies of the world. But I don't think that was what Jesus was saying at all! He is saying, "Resist the bully. But resist non-violently."

To see why that is you have to understand something about left and right in Jesus' day. Everyone was right-handed. A person used their right hand to do everything, especially when it came to dealing with other people. That was because – in the days before squeez-ably soft Charmin – the left hand had other, shall we say, responsibilities. You would never use your left hand for anything public. So let's see what Jesus was talking about when he is talking about being struck on the right cheek. ... *(ask for volunteer)* .. A strike on the right cheek could only have been a back-handed slap. That is the act of diminishment, an action that of treating another as an inferior. To which Jesus says, "if someone slaps you (e.g. puts you down), turn the other cheek also." Now to hit you the person has to slug you with their fist. That was the action of an equal, of a worthy opponent.

We always read through this passage fast, as if Jesus was saying one thing right after the other. But I kind of like imagining the crowd, and how Jesus might have paused right there for that image to sink in. The Aha!s as it started dawning on the folks in the crowd what Jesus was suggesting, the murmurs as they told it to their neighbor,

and pretty soon a roar of laughter was going up. The omg, that's brilliant. The bully would have no choice but to treat you with respect or quit hitting you. Either way, GAME OVER.

Let that image of the crowd laughing stay with you. Because next Jesus is talking about if someone takes your coat, give them your shirt also. To get this one, it helps to know that in that culture, it was not to your shame if you were naked; it was to your shame if you looked at someone who was naked. So imagine it as if Jesus had said, "If someone takes your jeans, run after them and give them your underwear also." They will be shamed, and have to insist, "No, No. Here, put these on." Can't you just see the crowd laughing great belly laughs. Brilliant. Resist, resist the evil. But do it with humor, do it with insight. Use people's pride and greed against them.

Next comes kind of a long ramble about doing good, giving to those who beg, and lending. There weren't any ATM machines or debit cards in those days. I suspect there was a lot of everyday lending between one person and another. Jesus is basically saying, "Don't be a tightwad. If you are blessed enough to have some money and someone needs it, give it to them. Be generous and trust God to give you what you need. (It's not like you can take it with you anyway.). This is a strong theme in Luke, We'll come back to it another day.

And finally Jesus comes to this nice little cluster of "Don't judge, don't condemn, do forgive." Is it only so you can get that full measure? Isn't this a little bit karma? I think it's because Jesus is trying to get us to realize that God's circle of care is big. So big that it even includes the people you think are bad. God's way of seeing us in nothing like our way of looking at one another. That's because God knows us, God knows the whole story of each of us. Even those we call enemies. Those people are not enemies to God. To God "those" people are beloved children too.

That thought brought to mind a quote that I saw on FB not long ago. It said,
Thinking of your child as behaving badly disposes you to think of punishment.
Thinking of your child as struggling to handle something difficult encourages you to help them through their distress. I hope God sees me that way. I trust that God does.
Oh, alright...maybe God sees my enemies like that too.

That quote actually goes right along with two others that got stuck in my head along the way. Maya Angelou said it so simply, "Hurt people hurt people. And I don't know who said "If you never heal from what hurt you, you will bleed on people who didn't cut you." You see, our so-called enemies don't need more hatred. They need

love. Everyone one of us, all the way from, oh, I don't know, the POTUS maybe, to my grumpy neighbor next door – need love. Now that does not mean we need uncritical niceness, passiveness, or permissiveness. We all need the kind of love that will respect us each as human beings and also challenge us to abandon our ego-driven lives of greed, resentment, or fear. We all need to be challenged to be rid of inner demons and be restored to our full humanity and connection, compassion, and place in community.

Now, I don't know how it might be for you, but whenever I get started down this road is it always way easier for me to start making the list, the mental list anyway, in my mind's eye coming up with all the people who have hurt me, or who, in my humble opinion, are doing a lot of bad in the world. I can think of who falls in the "enemies" category pretty quickly. I suppose it is a step in the right direction if instead of just making my enemies list I am, at the very least, trying to do the mental gymnastics of thinking of them as hurt people who hurt people. Trying to imagine them as people who have struggles and problems, wounds that need healing. But I can't stop there.

At some point I have to recognize my own unhealed hurts. We all have to recognize how, intentionally or not, we have bled on people who didn't hurt us. We are all on somebody's enemy list. That's why it is so important to pray for healing: ours, and others. It is so important to let God's healing love fill us, and to pray that it fill others.

Jesus came and taught us that we are all God's children. All of us. All people. And when he come to Jerusalem, when Jesus gave his life on that cross, he absorbed into himself the hurts of the whole world. By his love we are healed. We can not love our enemies, we can not do good and be generous out of our poverty of spirit or our broken-heartedness. We can only ever love and give and forgive out of God's healing love.

But thanks be to God, God does love us. God does heal us. God sets us on a new paths of right relationships, God gives us a new life. Today, let that love open your heart. Let that love heal your hurts. Let that love flow through you to the waiting wounded world around you. And may we seek that path of love and healing in Jesus' name together. Amen.