

“Radical Compassionism”
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Luke 6:27-38

At the end of last week’s Gospel reading Jesus seemed to be on the verge of instigating a social revolution. He had just said, “Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sorrowful, and despised,” and “Woe to you who are rich, fat, happy, and famous.” The crowd who had been listening to him, most of whom were probably poor, must have heard this as good news. It sounded as if Jesus were saying that things were about to get theirs, but what the rich got and what they got would be two different things. It sounded like the start of a revolution and those who were there might have done what they could to hasten things along.

I can almost see them, picking up sticks and rocks off the ground. Those who had swords might have pulled them out of their sheaths. Because Jesus could announce the revolution at any moment, and when he did they would want to be ready to rush into the city, pull the high and mighty off their thrones and lift up the poor and lowly. Can’t you see them, leaning in toward Jesus, testing the weight of the stones they held, slapping heavy, wooden sticks against their palms? You can almost hear them whispering, “Say it, Jesus. Just say the word.” And it is at that moment that he says, “But I tell you who hear me;” And they hear him all right. They are tensed and ready. Ears cocked toward the sound of his voice. “Just say the word, Jesus. Just say the word.” Swords are raised to the ready. Sticks held high in the air. Stones in hand, ready for throwing. And Jesus says, “Love your enemies!”

And there they go, charging off toward the city, whooping and yelling and swinging their swords and then, suddenly, stopping in their tracks.

“What did he say?”

They trudge back to where Jesus is standing, the tips of their swords dragging in the dust, their clubs hanging by their sides, stones held loosely in their hands.

“Excuse me,” one of them asks. “But what did you say?”

“Love your enemies,” Jesus repeats. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.”

And standing there, scratching their heads in wonder, one of them asks, “Could you be a little more specific?”

“Certainly,” Jesus replies. “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. Give to anyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods don’t ask for them back. In other words, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Now, I need to interrupt the story long enough to let you know that this rule Jesus gives them, this “Golden Rule,” was not original with him. It has also been found in the writings of Homer, and Seneca, and Philo. My guess is that even in Jesus’ time it had been around long enough to be domesticated, in the same way that we have domesticated it. When we say, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” don’t we really mean something like, “Be nice to people”? Don’t we have in mind something like opening a door for someone who is carrying an armload of groceries or sharing our umbrella with someone on a rainy day? But this is not what Jesus has in mind at all, and in the next section of this passage he spells it out.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He is setting up a dichotomy between those sinners who do good because they expect to be rewarded, and those children of God who do good just because that’s what they have seen their Father do. “He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked,” Jesus says. So be like that. Be more than nice. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

The word that is translated as *merciful* in the New Revised Standard Version is the Greek word *oiktirmon*, better translated as *compassionate*. “Be compassionate,” Jesus say, “just as your Father is compassionate.” It is an important distinction. Mercy is what a superior might show to a subordinate who has done something wrong. “I’ll let you off this time,” he says. But compassion means literally to “feel with”: it is a visceral sharing of someone else’s pain, so that you suffer right along with that one, and find yourself moved to do something about it. This, says Jesus, is what God does. He feels the pain of the wicked and the ungrateful, and when he feels their pain, when he shares in their sufferings, he is moved to do something about it. “Be compassionate,” Jesus concludes, “just as your Father is compassionate.” “Love your enemies”. And of all the hard things he asks us to do, this may be the hardest.

I have a rule for myself: that if I can’t look one of my parishioners in the eye or if he can’t look me in the eye then it means that we need to have a talk. A few years ago, I passed someone in a church hallway who fit that description. I said, “Good morning,” and he mumbled something and looked away. “Hmm,” I thought. “Looks like we need to talk.” So, after church that morning I asked if he could come by sometime during the week and he agreed and a few days later he knocked on the door of my study.

“Come in!” I said with a smile, and he stared at the floor. I showed him to a chair, pulled up another, and said, “You’re probably wondering why I asked you here.” He said that he was, and so I told him about my rule. “If we can’t look each other in the eye we probably need to have a talk,” I said. He didn’t need any further encouragement. He began to tell me all the things he didn’t like about me and about my ministry. He accused me of things that first shocked me and then made me furious. At one point I said, “You take that back! You can say anything else you want about me, but you can’t say that. That’s just not true!” He did take it back, but then he kept going. He was so angry, so agitated, that I kept bracing myself for the punch I thought he would surely deliver. If I had never had an enemy before, I had one then.

And that’s when it dawned on me. This man had only been a member of the church for a few months. He didn’t know me well enough to hate me as much as he claimed. And I found myself relaxing, dropping my defenses, giving up the fight. I found myself wondering instead what could cause so much anger in a person and even as he ranted and raved I began to have some compassion for him. As I thought about his situation I remembered that he was married to a woman who had once been married to a minister. That minister had been popular and charismatic. He had drawn big crowds to his church and preached great sermons. The leaders of that congregation thought he was the best thing that had ever happened to them. But then his wife started wearing dark glasses to church to hide the black eyes he gave her on Saturday night. And soon it was discovered that he was having an affair with one of the Sunday School teachers. He had slipped away from that town under cover of darkness and no one had heard from him since.

Which meant that this man who was screaming at me in my study had never had a chance to confront the minister who had beat his wife and cheated on her to her public shame. I began

to understand that the tongue-lashing I was getting was meant for him, and understanding that changed everything. I let the man get it out. I sat there as the words rained down like hammer-blows. But they didn't hurt anymore. They weren't meant for me. When he was finished I told him I was sorry for all the pain he felt and for all that had caused it, and then I offered to pray for him, and did, asking God to heal the hurt, and then we stood and embraced, and he called me "brother." It was one of those times when the gospel made perfect sense to me. I had loved my enemy. I had done good to him who hated me. I had blessed him who cursed me. And I had prayed for him who mistreated me. And I had been able to do it all not because I am so saintly, but because I had been able to "feel with" this man the pain that he felt. This doesn't mean that you will always be able to do that. It doesn't mean the anger will always belong to someone else. But it does mean we have to make every effort to feel the pain of others, to be compassionate... Frederick Buechner says, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin." Sometimes fatal, he says, which I considered while I was thinking that my enemy might punch me. Sometimes fatal, I think, as I consider the life of Jesus.

In Romans 5:8 Paul says that "while we were still sinners Christ died for us." And what he means is that when we were the enemies of God, God felt our pain, and suffered along with us, and was moved to do something. What he did was send his son Jesus, who took the hammer-blows of our anger like someone who knew they weren't really meant for him, who knew they were the blows of all the rage and sorrow and hatred and fear we have ever felt, and even though those blows nailed him to the cross and killed him, in the end, with our rage wrung out of us like water out of a dishcloth, we fell into the arms of the One we had killed and found ourselves saved in his embrace.

It is not a social revolution Jesus has in mind when he preaches this sermon on the plain, not the constitution of a new Israel but the establishment of God's Kingdom, and the way we will identify ourselves as citizens of that kingdom, he says, is to be compassionate just as our Father is compassionate. That's not compassionate conservatism. That's not compassionate liberalism. To coin a phrase that is radical-compassionism finally and it is what Jesus preached every day of his life. Those of you who have read the Gospels know that: he loved his enemies. He did good to those who hated him. He blessed those who cursed him. He prayed for those who abused him. He was a chip off the divine block, and he calls us to be the same. "Don't judge and you won't be judged," he says. "Don't condemn and you won't be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. 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." Or to put it another way, "what goes around comes around." But don't be misled. Jesus isn't saying that what goes around to others is what will come around from them. If that were true everybody would do it, even sinners! No, he is saying let love go around to others no matter what comes around to you, even if what comes around is crucifixion. Because what you give *to others* is what you will get *from God*, and if you can give a little bit of compassion—if you can "feel with" others, even your enemies—then what you get back from him will be a God-sized share of the same.

At least, that's what Jesus says.

And he—above anyone else—should know.

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