

Luke 6: 27-38

WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE? IT'S OKAY, YOU CAN ANSWER. VALENTINE'S DAY HAS PASSED FOR ANOTHER YEAR, SO MAYBE YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER WON'T HOLD YOU TO IT FOR ANOTHER 11 MONTHS. WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE? PEOPLE HAVE DONE SOME PRETTY UNBELIEVABLE THINGS FOR THOSE THEY LOVE. THE MAN WHO INVENTED THE PINK FLAMINGO LAWN ORNAMENT, HIS NAME WAS DONALD FEATHERSTONE. DONALD LOVED HIS WIFE NANCY SO MUCH, THAT THE TWO OF THEM WORE MATCHING OUTFITS FOR 35 YEARS. MAYBE A BIT ODD, BUT STILL UNBELIEVABLE. A CHINESE TEENAGER NAMED LUI CHING'S FRIEND HAD A DEBILIATING DISEASE THAT PREVENTED HIM FROM WALKING WELL SO LUI CARRIED HIS FRIEND TO SCHOOL ON HIS BACK EVERY DAY FOR 8 YEARS. UNBELIEVABLE! I BET YOU'RE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE 17TH RULER OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE IN INDIA. HIS NAME WAS SHAN JAHAN, AND HE WAS COMPLETELY IN LOVE WITH HIS WIFE. EVEN THOUGH THEIRS WAS AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE AND HE DIDN'T EVEN GET TO MEET HER UNTIL THE WEDDING, THE TWO OF THEM FELL HEAD-OVER-HEELS IN LOVE AND BUILT A LARGE FAMILY TOGETHER. WHEN SHE DIED GIVING BIRTH TO THEIR 14TH CHILD, SHAN JAHAN WAS DEVASTATED. HE ORDERED THE WHOLE EMPIRE TO MOURN HIS WIFE FOR TWO WHOLE YEARS. SHAN JAHAN REFUSED TO BE SEEN IN PUBLIC FOR AN ENTIRE YEAR. WHEN HE CAME BACK INTO THE PUBLIC EYE, HE DECIDED TO BUILD A TOMB WORTHY OF THE WOMEN HE LOVED SO MUCH. YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF SHAN JAHAN, BUT YOU'VE DEFINITELY HEARD OF THE TOMB HE BUILT FOR HIS WIFE---THE TAJ MAHAL. WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE? UNBELIEVABLE LOVE DOES UNBELIEVABLE THINGS. YOU'D DO A LOT, MAYBE EVEN ANYTHING FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE.

SO HOW ABOUT SOMEONE WHO'S YOUR ENEMY? WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE WHO DISLIKES YOU? "BUT I SAY TO YOU WHO LISTEN: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES." BUT HE DOESN'T STOP THERE. DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU, BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU, PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU. WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE WHO HATES YOU?

A FEW YEARS AGO THE NEW YORK TIMES RAN AN ESSAY WITH THE TITLE: "RUDENESS IS ON THE RISE. YOU GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT?" THE AUTHOR LAMENTS ON THE RISING TIDE OF RAGE AND MEANNESS IN OUR CULTURE. HOW, SHE ASKS, DO WE RESPOND TO A WORLD UNDER STRESS AND COUNTLESS DIVISIONS? THE EVIDENCE OF THAT STRESS IS EVERYWHERE. WHETHER TEMPER FLARE ON AN AIRPLANE, ON THE ROADWAYS, IN A WAITING ROOM OR LONG LINE AT THE STORE, WE SEEM TO HAVE LOST OUR CAPACITY FOR GRACIOUSNESS TOWARD OTHERS.

JESUS DOES NOT WASTE TIME OR MINCE WORDS. HE GOES RIGHT TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON: LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. THAT'S RIGHT. LOVE THEM. THOSE WHO OPPOSE YOU AND WANT YOU OUT OF THEIR WAY. LOVE THEM. PRAY FOR YOUR

PERSECUTORS. DON'T BE LIKE THE WORLD THAT LOVES THE FRIEND AND HATES THE ENEMY, ANYBODY CAN DO THAT. DOES THIS INCLUDE PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT POLITICAL IDEAS? OTHER CHRISTIANS IN OTHER DENOMINATIONS? THOSE YOU DON'T LIKE AT WORK? SCHOOL? IT ACTUALLY INCLUDES EVERYONE.

MARK TWAIN WAS ONCE ASKED, "DON'T YOU HAVE A PROBLEM AS A CHRISTIAN WITH ALL THOSE BITS OF THE BIBLE THAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND?" HE REPLIED, "IT'S NOT THE BITS THAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT CAUSE ME PROBLEMS. IT'S THE BITS THAT I DO UNDERSTAND THAT GIVE ME PROBLEMS!"

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING IS HARD BECAUSE WE UNDERSTAND IT. IT IS DIFFICULT TO LIVE OUT IN OUR DAILY LIVES AND DEMANDS A RADICAL CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE.

I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE MY HUSBAND AND FAMILY. I DON'T HAVE ANY PROBLEM LOVING MY FRIENDS. BUT HOW ON EARTH AM I EXPECTED TO LOVE THOSE PEOPLE WHO HAVE DEEPLY HURT ME IN THE PAST OR WHO, AT THE PRESENT TIME SAY HURTFUL THINGS BEHIND MY BACK? AND FOR SOME, THE ISSUE MAY RUN REALLY DEEP: OVER THE COURSE OF MY MINISTRY I HAVE KNOWN PEOPLE WHO SUFFERED HORRIFIC ABUSE AS CHILDREN OR MAY HAVE BEEN DEEPLY BETRAYED BY PEOPLE IN OTHER WAYS. AND WHAT ABOUT OUR CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS AROUND THE WORLD WHO ARE BEING PERSECUTED FOR THEIR FAITH? SUBJECTED TO BEATINGS AND TORTURE AND EVEN DEATH SIMPLY BEAUSE THEY WANT TO WORSHIP GOD AND HIS SON JESUS CHRIST? ARE THEY EXPECTED TO LOVE THEIR CAPTORS?

THIS IS SUCH A TOUGH TEACHING AND I DON'T WANT TO SAY ANYTHING THIS MORNING THAT WILL COME ACROSS AS TRITE AND SHALLOW AND TO SAY THINGS THAT MINIMIZE THE PAIN SOME OF YOU HOLD. SOMETIMES LOVING SOMEONE MEANS NOT ALLOWING THEM IN YOUR LIFE IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY. SOME PEOPLE HAVE CAUSED SO MUCH PAIN IN OUR LIVES THAT IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO REBUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH THEM OF ANY KIND. BUT IT DOESN'T MEAN WE CAN'T WORK ON FORGIVENESS.

I HAVE KNOWN COUNTLESS PEOPLE WHOSE VERY LIVES DEPENDED ON THEIR SEVERING TIES WITH THEIR OFFENDERS, YET HAVE DONE THE HARD WORK OF FORGIVING.

THE NATURAL REACTION OF OUR SINFUL NATURE IS TO HATE OUR ENEMIES. DO TO OTHERS AS THEY DO TO US MAY NOT BE GOLDEN, BUT IN REALITY IT IS THE RULE BY WHICH LIFE SEEMS TO BE LIVED. HERE IS THE DILEMMA. HOW DO WE MOVE FROM THE NATURAL INSTINCT TO MATCH BLOW FOR BLOW AND WORD FOR WORD? TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY, HOW DO WE LIVE OUR LIVES RESPONDING WITH GRACE AND KINDNESS, INSTEAD OF REACTING WITH WORDS OR ACTIONS THAT SEEK TO ANSWER HURT WITH MORE HURT? MOST OF ALL, IT ASKS US TO GIVE UP OUR GRIEVANCES TOWARD OUR ENEMIES.

IN HER POPULAR MEMOIR, "TRAVELING MERCIES," ANNE LAMOTT WRITES THAT WITHHOLDING FORGIVENESS IS LIKE DRINKING RAT POISON AND THEN WAITING FOR THE RAT TO DIE. I THINK WHAT SHE'S GETTING AT IS THAT IF I'M CONSUMED WITH MY OWN PAIN, IF I'VE MADE INJURY MY IDENTITY, IF I INSIST ON WEAPONIZING MY WELL-DESERVED ANGER IN EVERY INTERACTION I HAVE WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE HURT ME, THEN I'M DRINKING POISON, AND THE POISON WILL KILL ME LONG BEFORE IT DOES ANYTHING TO THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED ME. TO REFUSE THE SEDUCTIVE LIE THAT REVENGE WILL MAKE ME FEEL BETTER. TO CAST MY BURDEN UPON GOD, BECAUSE JUSTICE AND JUDGEMENT BELONGS TO GOD.

AMONG OTHER THINGS, THIS MEANS WE STOP GOSSIPING. WE STOP COMPLAINING TO OTHERS ABOUT THINGS WE DISAGREE WITH. THIS MEANS WE STOP MAKING DIVISIONS BETWEEN "US" AND "THEM." IF YOU DISAGREE WITH SOMEONE AND IT REALLY BUGS YOU, GO TALK TO THEM ABOUT IT. IT ALSO MEANS WE NEED TO HAVE THE HUMILITY TO ADMIT WE MIGHT NOT ALWAYS BE RIGHT.

I KNOW YOU DIDN'T COME TO CHURCH THIS MORNING THINKING, "I WOULD REALLY LIKE A CHALLENGE TODAY; PERHAPS I WILL BE ASKED TO LOVE MY ENEMY." NEVERTHELESS, THAT IS WHAT JESUS DEMANDS.

WHAT WOULD MOTIVATE US TO LOVE OUR ENEMIES? WHY WOULD WE EVER DO GOOD TO AND WISH GOOD UPON THOSE WHO ARE UNKIND TO US? IT'S SIMPLE. WE ARE TO BE LIKE THIS BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT GOD IS LIKE. WHEN WE LOOK AT WHAT DIVIDES US, WE SHOULD NOT FORGET THAT WE ARE DIVIDED FROM GOD. OUR SIN AND SELFISH REBELLION HAS SEPARATED US FROM GOD, AND WE ARE THE ONES AT FAULT. BUT HOW DOES GOD ACT? GOD IS GENEROUS TO ALL PEOPLE, AND HE IS ASTONISHINGLY MERCIFUL.

JESUS LOVED HIS ENEMIES. HE PRAYED FOR HIS PERSECUTORS. HE WAS TAUNTED AND INSULTED. JESUS OFFERED HIS CHEEK TO HIS SMITERS. HIS BACK TO THOSE WHO WHIPPED. HE CARRIED HIS CROSS DOWN THE LONELY ROAD OF SORROWS. WHEN THEY RIPPED THE COAT AND SHIRT OFF HIS BACK AND POUNDED NAILS INTO HIS HANDS AND FEET, HE WENT ON LOVING AND FORGIVING. HE DIDN'T SHOW LOVE ONLY FOR HIS FRIENDS BUT TO HIS ENEMIES, WEEPING OVER THE CITY THAT REJECTED HIS PLEA FOR MERCY. HE DIES FOR HIS ENEMIES. HE DIED FOR YOU AND FOR ME. HE EMBODIED THE LOVE HE SPOKE ABOUT. HE TOOK NO REVENGE ON THOSE WHO FALSELY ACCUSED HIM. INSTEAD, HE PRAYED FOR THEM. "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM; THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO." WHILE WE WERE GOD'S ENEMIES, CHRIST DIED FOR US. WE DESERVED WRATH AND VENDEANCE, AND WE GET INSTEAD UNENDING LOVE AND MERCY.

REV. BARBARA CAWTHORNE CRAFTON WRITES IN HER LENTEN DEVOTIONAL: "MY ONE O'CLOCK APPOINTMENT IS LATE. MAYBE I CAN MAKE SENSE OF THE MESS ON MY DESK. I BEGIN, PITCHING NOTICES OF MEETINGS THAT HAVE ALREADY OCCURRED AND ADS FOR NEW

STYLES OF CHURCH OFFERING ENVELOPES. I PICK UP A PIECE OF STRATCH PAPER TO SEE IF IT'S A KEEPER. 'DON'T REACT!' IS SCRAWLED ALL OVER THE SHEET, AGAIN AND AGAIN, TWENTY OR THIRTY TIMES. IT'S MY HANDWRITING.

SOME PEOPLE MAKE ME ANGRY. I NEED TO TRY MY BEST TO RESPOND TO THEM WITH KINDNESS AND SELF-CONTROL. I NEED NOT TO RISE TO THE BAIT OF THEIR BEHAVIOR WITH ANGRY BEHAVIOR OF MY OWN. THIS IS HARD FOR ME. 'DON'T REACT!' I WRITE ON WHATEVER OLD ENVELOPE COMES TO HAND. DON'T REACT. REMAIN KIND. DON'T LET SOMEONE ELSE CONTROL YOU. CONTROL YOURSELF. I SUPPOSE SATAN WOULD PREFER THAT I LOSE MY TEMPER. HE CERTAINLY TRIES TO BRING THAT ABOUT, AND SOMETIMES HE SUCCEEDS. I FEEL MY HEART POUNDING AND MY VOICE TIGHTENING. SOMETIMES MY HEAD HURTS. AFTER ALL THESE YEARS OF MINISTRY, I DO NOT CEASE TO BE AMAZED AT THE EASE WITH WHICH SATAN CAN WALK IN AND TAKE CHARGE OF MY REACTIONS TO OTHERS.

BUT I BELONG TO CHRIST. IT IS CHRIST THAT I HAVE ENTRUSTED MY LIFE. WHILE SATAN IS STRONGER THAN I AM, CHRIST IS STRONGER THAN HE IS. CHRIST IS STRONGER THAN MY ANGER. ONLY CHRIST IS ABLE TO SOFTEN MY HEART AND CONTROL MY REACTIONS.

IT IS JESUS' UNFAILING, UNFATHOMABLE, UNBELIEVABLE LOVE FOR US THAT EQUIPS, ENABLES, AND EMPOWERS US TO LOVE. WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE? HOW ABOUT FOR YOUR ENEMY? HOW ABOUT FOR ANYONE? SOMETHING UNBELIEABLE IN CHRIST!? MAY IT BE SO.

