

Sunday February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
7<sup>th</sup> after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** God of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, you caused a people to journey; they became a great nation. You named your servant Israel, for you would dwell in their midst. You are God almighty and worthy of worship; we follow our ancestors and assemble to praise you. Be among us to guide us as we honour and adore you, and sanctify our gathering, O God Most High. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Remember that in all things we are more than conquerors because of God's love. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). In Christ we are forgiven.

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** It is God in Christ Jesus who demonstrated and taught us how to be faithful and generous. To contribute the well-being of others and to participate in the spiritual call to generosity, we offer our gifts, as our Lord taught us. May he find us faithful to his teaching.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:**

**BENEDICTION:** O Christ, help us to be your disciples in deed and in truth. Grant us the grace to bless those who curse us, to forgive those who condemn us, to receive those who judge us, and to love those who hate us. Thus, do we pray, that all your people might be one in the Spirit. Amen.

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Luke 6:27-38  
“Can’t We Skip this Part?”

I guess that it is the nature of being human, but we all wrestle with questions. Questions that do not seem to have easy answers. Questions that keep us up at night. For example: If it took eight men ten hours to build a wall, how long would it take four men? Answer: No time at all, because the wall is already built. How about this math question? If you had three apples, and four oranges in one hand; and four apples and three oranges in the other hand, what you have? Answer: Really big hands.

Then there is this imponderable. Why is it impossible to send a telegram to Washington? Well that’s because he’s dead. Or this one. What three letter word turns a girl into a woman? Age. The Bay of Bengal is in what state? Liquid, or course. One more? Are you sure you can handle it? Okay. How can you lift an elephant with one hand? No problem, since you will never find an elephant with one hand.

Riddles are fun, and kids love them. Adults too, if your reaction is any indication. But there are lots of question that are not fun at all. Questions that tear at our hearts and souls. Questions that cause us doubt, and can even lead to a crisis of faith. In Christian circles we debate, and are assaulted by non-believers with age old perceived holes in the biblical record, or biblical faith. But for every question, there is also ample responses from scholars or what we call apologists.

So, debates still rage about creation verses evolution, the virgin birth, the resurrection, whether miracles occurred, and so on. Some of these issues, perhaps, when mentioned, get you to sit up readying yourself to listen. Well if you are searching for such answers, all I can say is there is, as I mentioned, lots of resources out there to meet your need. For me personally, I used to wrestle with many of these issues, but frankly I have come to peace with a lot of it.

I have heard and read a myriad of answers to most of these questions that provoke doubt, that they simple do not bother me anymore. I also have discovered that those who raise these objections to the faith, tend to do so, not because they want and answer but because they simply do not want deal with the conviction that the Spirit of God is putting in their hearts. If they can deny the resurrection then they can deny Christ’s call on their lives.

At this stage of life, I have discovered that what bothers me more and more, is the question of how does Jesus expect me to live up to the standard he lays out before us. If, as I believe, following Christ gives us hope, peace, purpose etc.: then what are the implications on my life. The Apostle Paul claimed to have a thorn in his side, but today we confront one of the sharpest thorns that can pierce our hearts. I do not lose sleep over trying to understand the miracles.

I do, however, fret about loving my enemies, doing good to those who hate me, blessing those who curse me, praying for those who mistreat me, turning the other cheek and so on. To me, this passage is where the real struggle is. What Jesus is calling us to, is so counterintuitive. Love an enemy. Have you met my enemies? Give to anyone who asks. They will just use it for drugs or booze. Turn that other cheek. Not in this lifetime. I think we have forgotten over time, how revolutionary these words of Jesus are.

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“Do unto others as you would have these do unto you.” The Golden Rule, we call it. Some like to argue that Jesus’ Golden Rule was like other great thinkers and philosophers, but that is not true at all. The ancient law giver Hammurabi, emphasized in his writing getting even when he wrote, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” If you knock out my tooth. or blind my eye, then I should inflict the same on you.

I wish I could remember who said that if we lived by the rule “an eye for an eye”, we would be living in a world full of blind people. Jewish Rabbis, Greek philosophers, and even Confucius all taught that you should not do to others, what you would not want them to do unto you. In other words, if you don’t want your enemy to do bad things to you, then do not do bad things to them. We call this *détente*.

In global terms it is like the super powers and there “mutually assured destruction” weapons strategy. In modern life we might sum up the new golden rule as “he or she who has the gold sets the rules”. Jesus is so different. Remember that initially he was speaking to Jewish people living under a very repressive regime of Roman occupation. The Jews hated the Romans and anyone who cooperated with them, like tax-collectors.

I am telling you all right now, if Jesus’ words in this passage do not upset you, or rock your boat; then you do not understand him. The big lie that we tell ourselves is that we have no enemies. We say to Jesus, “No problem Lord. I can love everyone, because I have no enemies.” Sure, we might allow that a serial killer, rapist, or child pornographer is an enemy to us all; but me personally? I do not think so.

Really? Well let me offer a few possibilities of potential enemies in today’s modern world. How about a boss that makes everyone’s life miserable? A former spouse who turned a child custody battle into a nightmare. A teacher who falsely accused you cheating. The minister who turned your friends against you or split your church. A creditor who drove you into bankruptcy. A next-door neighbour who repeatedly threatens your family.

Then there is this one I’ve heard of more often recently. What about a doctor whose incompetence ruined your health, or the health of a loved one? The bully who beats up your child. A lover who gives you a disease that cannot be cured. A drunk driver who kills your spouse or children. A co-worker who claims credit for your work, and reaps the bonuses and promotions that should rightfully be yours.

So, you have no enemies? Really? Jesus calls on us to treat those who we despise, or find difficult, as God’s best. To respect the dignity of one we are tempted to think of as less than human. Have we not said of someone, “He or she is less than human, or they are no better than an animal”? By treating our enemies with dignity, is a recognition that to someone else we might be the enemy. Someone else thinks of us as less than human. How would we still want to be treated?

However, it gets harder. Jesus makes me squirm in my seat. “Do good to those who hate you”. How radical is that?

Sunday February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019  
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How can you bring yourself to do something good for someone who makes your life miserable? I suggest it takes a fortitude beyond human strength. And this call of Christ is not just for us as individuals, but also for us as a community.

Do you remember what happened on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006? In Lancaster County Pennsylvania, Charles Roberts walked into the Amish school named West Nickle Mines and shot 11 people, killing 5 school girls before killing himself. What most people do not know is what happened that very night. Charles' mother, Terry, devastated that her son could do these terrible things, prepared to move away from the community, to avoid the shame and public scrutiny.

Instead, that evening, several Amish neighbours made their way to her home to comfort her in her grief, and urging her to remain in the community. Several of the families of the victims, attended Charles' funeral to support the Roberts. Terry Roberts says, "How can anybody not forgive after what I have experienced?" I do not know if I could be as gracious as my Amish brothers and sisters. Still think Jesus' words are not hard to accept?

What about blessing those who curse us? When we use the word curse here, we are inferring that the person is wishing the worst for us. Often, out of anger, a curse, or swear is directed towards us. Can we immediately bless that person, and not with a blessing that goes like this, "Yeah, well God bless you and send you straight to heaven, preferably soon!" And just because you do your cursing of others while behind the wheel of the car, and no one hears you, save God and your passengers, does not make it right.

Charles Swindoll is so on target when he wrote that the last piece of our bodies to be redeemed is our right foot. In other words, the foot on the accelerator and brake. Praying for those who mistreat me. O come on. I mean, I pray for my family and the folks in this church, but that other minister who says bad things about me; no way! Praying for those who mistreat us is a tough spiritual discipline, but when practiced it can really change our hearts.

Perhaps we make a list of those who mistreated us and pray for them. Pray for the boss who under pays us. The neighbour kid who vandalizes your house. The person who continually takes advantage of you, or never allows the relationship to be a two-way street. Then Jesus speaks of turning the other cheek. A very famous command. One to be taken both figuratively, and literally. In other words, do not hit back.

Kids wrestle with this a great deal, especially siblings. How many times have we heard, "But he hit me first." Adults still get into it physically, but more often it is a verbal slap. Something said, designed to cut deep. Jesus tells us to let them have another go. Then there is the situation in Jesus' day when you could lose your coat. One way was by theft, but another was by a lawsuit. But under first century law you could sue for a person's inner shirt, but never their outer cloak, which kept a person warm.

Jesus says, let them have it. Really? We'd all be going around naked. Well, hold on a minute. Jesus isn't telling us to forgo our legal rights. Instead, he is getting at a critical point. Give your enemy, your coat and thus demonstrate that people are more important than things. It could very well mean, surrendering what we have, to demonstrate our love for our enemies.

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Still think this is easy? Then there is this one. If you lend money to someone, don't worry about getting it back, ever. The situation here is not about investments, but rather about a person in need coming and looking for financial aid. This hits especially close to home for me. Often someone will come into our church offices, asking to see me. Often it is in the hope that I can offer some financial support to them. What is interesting, is that almost to a person, they will tell me they will pay me back, or us back.

How often does the money find its way back? Rarely. It is so rare that when it does happen it stuns me. Jesus says, don't worry about. Be generous, even to those who have never been especially generous to you or the church. As Christ followers, we are not supposed to be attached to material goods, but we are.

I know, because I am. It's a hard habit to break. Giving makes us feel vulnerable. It calls on us to trust someone we do not know very well. We fear we are being used, that our hard-earned money, or donated money, will go to illicit activities. Let me suggest a fundamental shift in how we think about our generosity. There is some real prudence in being careful, of vetting the institutions we support.

To demand accountability from our charities. I also know that some charities that help the poor, or dispossessed, administer a means test to see if someone qualifies for help. Governments do the same thing. The situation though that Jesus is referring to is of a more intimate nature. It has to do with a one on one encounter. It's not about institutions, but can I suggest it is about hearts. Next time someone approaches us for help, we turn our focus from is that person worthy, to what is going on in my heart.

Generosity is not about the other person; it is always about me. What is God doing in my life, and why did he bring this person to me? Do I love my money more than the person standing in front of me? I bet you would rather talk about biblical inerrancy now instead of this stuff. But one question remains out of this high calling of Jesus. Why? What is the rationale for Jesus' revolutionary approach?

Jesus tells us doesn't he. He tells us we are children of God, so we need to be like God to others. Let me put it another way. I think there are two types of people in the world, and you and I can choose which we are. It is also not set in stone and day to day we can switch back and forth if we are not paying attention. First there those like God who are very special. Then there is everyone else who are ordinary.

It doesn't take any level of specialness to love those who love us in return. It is very easy to give to those who give to us. I can be nice to anyone who nice to me. In a civilized society this is how we expect things to function. Lending money for a return plus interest, why that's good business, and everyone does that. Just look at all the banks and money lending places we have. What is so unique about any of that?

Christians however, are to be special or more accurately perhaps, different. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who seek to harm us, give without any expectation of return, treat those with kindness that otherwise we might think do not deserve it.

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Tony Campolo tells a story about a director of a prominent inner-city ministry who was driving one of his young workers to a meeting when the young man shouted, "Stop!" When the car stopped, the young man jumped out and ran back to where a derelict-looking man held a sign that said, "I need money for food." The young Christian worker gave the man a five-dollar-bill, which was all the money he was carrying.

When he got back in the car, the director of the ministry reprimanded him, "Why did you do that? That guy is probably going to spend the money on drugs or booze. You know that as well as I do." "You're probably right," the young man answered, "but I gave him the money just in case." (Stories that feed your soul, p. 41) Still think Jesus' words are easy. It is a lot easier to just dismiss them.

It is easier to think of them as ideals to strive for rather than base line from which to begin. Grace as Christ expressed it unusual. His grace is uncommon. No one else in the history of the world has ever called us to such a standard but this is the Christ-like thing to do.

How soon we forget God is like that. God loves those who hate him. God gives to those who can never give back. God blesses those who curse him. God is good to those who do not even recognize he exists. God is very special and those who love by the Golden Rule are special just like God. There is no way we can ever skip over this part.