

“How Can We Hear This Teaching?”

Luke 6:27–38

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Vaughn Crowe-Tipton suggests that congregations respond to our reading from Luke 6, Jesus’ teaching about loving our enemy and forgiving those who hurt us, like his children responded to seeing spinach on their plate when they were young. No matter how much explanation we might give about the value of what is before us, no one wants to dig in (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 381).

It is a metaphor that makes sense, though when Ian was young, he loved spinach, it was peas that gave him trouble. They came back even if we hid them. But we get the point. There are things that children reject, and in like manner, we have no interest in loving our enemy.

Crowe-Tipton notes that the masses gather in our time to hear sermons like “Three Easy Steps to Love” and “Five Paths to a Better Life.” If Jesus had preached sermons like this on the mount or the plain, he says, Constantine could have been born into a Christian home. But “Love Your Enemy” is a non-starter, a dead end.

We play nice, we pretend to take this seriously, in church. We listen respectfully to what a preacher or teacher has to say because this is Jesus talking. He is our Savior *and* Lord, not just our golden ticket to a good outcome in eternity but our example for how to live. But we have no intention of doing this or expecting anyone else to either.

I mean, how can we hear this at a time when the politics of revenge is defining our national life? How do we talk about loving the enemy when one of our closest allies responds to a horrific terrorist attack by killing 50 Palestinians for every Israeli killed?

Perhaps more to the point, how can we seriously consider this teaching when we think of the way people treat each other in the workplace or at school, the way some family members and people we thought were friends have treated us, and will continue to treat us even more, if we seem to condone their behavior through forgiveness?

How can we hear this teaching and why would I preach on it? Maybe I should just stop here and quit wasting my time and yours... or consider one of the other texts . . . The passage from Genesis won't help us, it's about forgiveness too, but the lovely words about resurrection in the reading from 1 Corinthians 15 might provide an escape.

The problem is these are the words of Jesus, and this is not the only place in his teachings where this challenge appears. Furthermore, we know that he not only talks about forgiveness, he practices it. He forgives the people who are putting him to death while they are doing so. And in the end, somewhere deep down, we know that vengeance is a meal that never satisfies, to stay with Vaughn Crowe-Tipton's metaphor. Getting even never works because whether the problem is in Israel, Northern Ireland, or anywhere else, disputing parties never agree on who started it all. We need an alternative to the way of vengeance.

Perhaps Desmond Tutu put it best when he addressed the crazy practice of victims of racial violence in South Africa forgiving those who perpetrated violence against them, saying, "It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future (*The Sunflower*, p. 268)."

So, how do we listen to what Jesus is saying? Perhaps we begin by noting what he is not saying. He is not saying that we should okay abuse or stay in an abusive relationship, or practice the kind of forgiveness that allows the other party—whether a person, group, or nation—to continue to harm us. He does talk about doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who abuse us. It's all part of loving our enemies and forgiving those who harm us. But he does not tell us to condone abuse.

We need reasonable boundaries for healthy behavior. Forgiveness is expressed best after acknowledgement of wrongdoing and a desire to stop. But wrong is wrong and should be named as such. We can care about and pray for those who do us harm while standing our ground.

I have told some of you about the only marriage I have refused to perform in forty-three years of ministry. The young man marrying the

young woman in the church I served insisted on his bride-to-be saying she would honor and obey him.

I wasn't going to concede to the language of one-way obedience, but when I asked him why it was so important to him, he said it was because this was the only kind of marriage that could succeed, the only kind God would bless, one where the man is in charge and the woman obeys, no matter what. This is why his parents were together, he said, his mother submitted to his father even when he abused her, which he probably shouldn't have done, he said . . . but she submitted, she obeyed.

"Probably?" I said, before trying to educate the boy and refusing to do the wedding. Ironically, the mother of the bride, whom I feared would be upset with me, thanked me for refusing. "That little girl hasn't listened to anything her parents have said since she was fourteen," she said, "the thought of her obeying that little #@&^ makes me furious!"

Jesus does not want us to encourage abuse. Praying for people who do bad things is not patting them on the back for doing them, nor is it looking the other way. It's recognizing their humanity and wanting good for them. This can help us begin to listen to what Jesus is saying.

It can also help to realize how much we depend on grace, and in turn, how much grace can and must shape our efforts. Be merciful, Jesus says, just as God is merciful. We are not all the same, there is no need to relativize experience and suggest that one harmful act is the same as any other. But we are all sinners, we all need grace, and those who receive unmerited love have an obligation to extend love to others.

Interestingly, the word translated as "credit" in our text—if you love those who you love, what "credit" is that to you—*charis*, means "grace." No grace is involved when there is mutual exchange. Grace is, by definition, undeserved. Here Jesus says that if we forgive, we will be forgiven, and in the Lord's Prayer, he teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" This sounds like forgiveness is somewhat earned. But Jesus calls his disciples in John 13 to love one another *as he has loved them/us*. And 1 John 4:19 says we love because God first loves us. God's grace and love come first. In response, we then extend grace and love to others.

Our challenge is that we are a bit like Ruby Turpin in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation." She is a fine, upstanding church lady who doesn't think she needs much grace and thus looks down on all who do—persons of color, poor white trash, and anyone who isn't just like her. She holds on to her arrogance until she is confronted by a young woman named Mary *Grace* who doesn't appreciate her judgment.

"Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," says Mary Grace, to which Mrs. Turpin replies tearfully, "I am not a wart hog, from hell," but she doesn't even convince herself. She sees her flaws, her need for grace, what she has in common with others. And she sees a vision of persons of color and white trash, freaks and lunatics, all tumbling up toward heaven with even their virtues burned away.

Mary Grace enables Ruby Turpin to see herself as she needs to so that she can see others properly. It is a kind of grace, tough grace, but once we realize our need for it, it is easier to extend grace to others.

But, as noted, we not only depend on grace, as in the mercy of God for our inadequacy, we need grace, as in strength beyond our own, to forgive. I think of the story about a time Corrie Ten Boom was speaking to a crowd after World War II about the amazing forgiveness of God made possible in Jesus Christ. She said that when we confess our sins, God forgives us and casts our sins into the deepest ocean and places a sign there which reads, "No Fishing Allowed!"

After the speech, a man approached her. She recognized him immediately. He was a guard at the Nazi concentration camp in Ravensbrook where her sister died and where she had been. He said he had become a Christian after the war and had received God's forgiveness, but he wanted to know if she could forgive him.

She felt nothing inside but then remembered that forgiveness is not an emotion but an act of the will. And so, she moved her arm toward the man, and as she did, she felt warmth moving through her, and she was able to reach out and embrace the man, with tears streaming down her face, saying, "I forgive you, my brother, from the bottom of my heart."

She then remembered the words of Romans 5. "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope

does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (vv. 3–5).”

Loving our enemy may well be beyond us. Paul tells the church in Corinth that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. This may apply to more than our earthly bodies. We cannot reach God’s realm alone . . . but we are not alone. With the grace of God working in us through the power of the Holy Spirit, anything is possible, even forgiveness, perhaps even loving our enemy.

Corrie Ten Boom’s story also points to one other thing that might help us—stories of people who have been able to practice forgiveness and love their enemies. Corrie Ten Boom stands at the front of this line, given the wrongs she forgives. If she can forgive, surely we can.

We might also look to Joseph in today’s reading from Genesis, and he certainly offers an example of leadership—he does not seek vengeance from his brothers but rather forgives them, and he focuses on the welfare of the people he serves, not his own needs. But as some scholars have pointed out, his context is privileged, he ends up in power. Would he forgive his brothers if he were in prison for hitting on his boss’s wife? But Joseph does choose forgiveness. So, it is possible for us to forgive the sibling who wronged us, the parent who never blessed us, the child who disappointed us, the spouse who betrayed us.

And there are other examples. I think of the British and German soldiers who declared a truce on Christmas Day in 1914 during World War I. It was only one day, but it was a start. I think of Will Campbell who, after a lifetime of work on racial reconciliation, realized he struggled most to love racists, and thus spent a year drinking bourbon with Ku Klux Klansman. Whom do we struggle most to love?

Knowing others have loved their enemies lets us know it is possible, especially when we realize we are not alone, that God is with us. It is not easy work, but it is possible to hear this teaching, and doing so is not only central to our calling, it is vital to the future of our nation with all its divisions, and our world with its even greater challenges. Spinach is good for us. So are love and forgiveness. We might as well eat up!