

## Love Your Enemies

Luke 6:27-36

Several weeks ago, a discussion of theology spilled over into politics. Vice President JD Vance, a practicing Roman Catholic, cited Catholic ethical teaching to defend the Trump administration's actions. He used the idea of the *ordo amoris*, the ordering of loves, to show why they were focusing on those within the United States, and changing priorities on immigration, refugees, and foreign aid. This hierarchy of who we love is based on proximity and begins with those within our family, those closest to us. It extends out to those who are close to us geographically, nationally.

That led to some pushback. As Lutherans, we may not always agree when the pope points out your bad theology, but it's still worth paying attention to when he does. Others pointed to the parable of the Good Samaritan as a recognition that the Christian definition of who our neighbors are is expanded by Jesus, to include those who are ethnically, nationally, and/or religiously different than we are.

Jesus extends the idea of who we are to love even further in today's Gospel lesson. Continuing the sermon on the plain, Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus today focuses on changing the ordering of loves. Instead of just loving those closest to you, he tells his disciples to love their enemies. Instead of just loving those who are in their family, in their tribe, in their community, they are to love those who are different than they are.

We're blessed to live in a time where many of us don't have physical enemies. We don't live in fear of being attacked, although if you're an opposing fan in a rival's home stadium, you might still be a little nervous, as a recent

Allstate Insurance commercial shows a Baylor fan sitting in a section full of Kansas fans. Yet for those who live in Ukraine, in Israel and Palestine, and in other areas of conflict throughout the world, being among enemies is much more of a concern. An enemy is not an abstract concept for them, and it was not an abstract concept for the people Jesus is teaching and preaching to here.

And Jesus makes it even less abstract and more practical by describing specific actions to show what loving your enemy looks like. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek when you're struck. Give the shirt off of your back when someone asks for your coat. Give to those who beg from you, and don't demand back your goods if someone takes them.

This is a difficult teaching. If you honestly wrestle with what this means, you're left with seeing how bad you are at following these commands. These commands don't follow the order of love that we anticipate. We would like to follow the last of those commands, what we call the Golden Rule, but instead only treat people as well as they treat us. In these words, Jesus is communicating the standard of what's expected of God's people in God's kingdom. We are to love and forgive like no one else does, even our enemies.

Because as we reflect on these commands, we are forced to confront how we utterly fail to follow them. We can't do it. We can't keep these commands; not completely, not joyfully, not wholeheartedly. It's not just difficult; it's impossible.

Those commands are impossible for us to keep. We have trouble enough loving those around us, those we actually like. How could we love those who hate us, those who persecute us, those who wish us harm? We can't. But God can. And God did.

Jesus lived out these commands he gave, the description of how things are in the kingdom of God. He didn't just love his family. Instead, he said that whoever does the will of His Father in heaven were his brothers and sisters.

Jesus loved even those who persecuted him, even praying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He puts the best possible construction on their actions ("they don't know what they are doing") and asks for God the Father to show them grace, to give them mercy. Jesus lives out the very command he gave to us. What we can't do, what we refuse to do, Jesus willingly and perfectly accomplishes. He overcame evil with good. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we're forgiven even when we conform to the world and hate our enemies. But Jesus calls us to follow him in living a different way.

All of this is demanded by virtue of God's own graciousness and mercy. Christians behave lovingly to their enemies not as a ploy to outmaneuver them, not even because they anticipate a reward (although we hope and pray for some sort of positive change or outcome), but finally because God is a God of mercy. Luther puts it this way: "We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends and, if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ."

And that is the key part in how we can try to love our enemies, even if we will only do so

imperfectly. We pray for them. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies and do good to them, they will not despitefully use and persecute us. They certainly will. But not even that can hurt or overcome us, so long as we pray for them." I cannot hate a Christian (or any other person) for whom I pray, because when I pray for them, I see someone who needs the love of Jesus just as much as I do. Changing my perspective, seeing others through the eyes of God, opens our hearts for God to show love through us.

During the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, part of that nation's attempt to move beyond an era of apartheid and all the evil that went with it, a woman about 70 years old was called to testify concerning the activities of a policeman in her township. The young policeman had come one night with some others and had pulled her son from her home and right before her eyes he had shot the woman's son at point-blank range and left him for her to bury. Two years later the same officer had come and arrested her husband. He, too, died before the woman's eyes. "What do you want?" asked the presiding official at the Truth and Reconciliation proceeding.

After a silence, the woman answered, "I want three things. I want to be taken to the place where my husband was burned so I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial. Second, my husband and my son were my only family. They were all I had. Therefore, I want this police officer to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to my home in the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can pour out on him whatever love I still have

remaining with me. And finally, I want this officer to know that I offer him forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive me. This was also the wish of my husband. I kindly ask that someone come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take this police officer in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven. As they led the woman across the room, the police officer, apparently overwhelmed, fainted. As others attended to the officer, the woman's friends and neighbors, most of them victims of the same sort of violence, began to sing softly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. . ."

So, who do you need to pray for? Who do you need to love? Is it the co-worker who is your rival for advancement? Is it the bully at school or online? Is it someone on the opposite side of the political spectrum? Is it a rival for someone's affections, or even the other man or other woman? Whoever your enemy is, pray for them. Love them. See them as a sinner for whom Christ died, a sinner who is as in need of grace and forgiveness as you are.

Following Jesus changes how we order our loves. Instead of just loving those who are like us, those closest to us, we are called to love everyone, even our enemies. We will try, and we will fail. Yet because of Jesus' perfect love for us, even while we were his enemies because of our sin, we are forgiven. That's a wonderful promise.

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February 23, 2025