

The Degree to Which We Are Free

Luke 6:27–38

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Who is an enemy? ISIS? Al Qaeda? Russia? North Korea? Immigrants? White supremacists? The media? Little Davey Pearson who hawked a loogy on my jacket in the 5th grade? The friend who betrayed my trust? The person who took something without my permission? It used to be whenever I heard this passage, I thought to myself, *I don't have any enemies*. But I was wrong. There are people I would be okay with never thinking about again. There are people I'd rather not waste my time trying to love. So I take my shoes off, because some of us in this room and too many in this world have survived terrible things. Today we are on holy ground as we listen to Jesus' most challenging words to his disciples: “Love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who abuse you. Be merciful as God is merciful.”

If we are honest, we categorize who we love. Maybe think of it like a tier system. On the top tier—in the Penthouse suite—are our favorites: our sweethearts, our children, maybe some in our family or our closest friends, our pets who love us unconditionally. On tier two are friends we trust maybe in church or at the job. They are the people who are there for us in a time of need. One level down are acquaintances or people who think the way we do theologically or politically. Then, second from the bottom are those who we disagree with and do not trust. Perhaps they defriended us on Facebook. And then, in the basement are those who hurt us. Those who took advantage, or robbed us of our dignity, or devalued our humanity. They are the ones we try to put out of our memory. We put people into categories of those who we love and those who we'd rather not waste our time on.

Except, when we listen to Jesus, he is holding his followers to a higher standard. He says everyone surrounds themselves with people who love them back. Everyone cares about people who care about them. Loving those on the higher tiers, while it is meaningful, it does not reflect

the depth of God's heart. Dorothy Day once said, "I really only love God as much as the person I love the least"—those on the bottom tier. If she's right even us church folk are in trouble, especially these days. It's rich in theory, poor in practice. We can sing and pray and praise Jesus all day long, but if our love for God is indeed measured by how we love our enemies, then I cannot say that I love God very well. Now Jesus is not saying we stay in harmful situations. What Jesus is saying is that when we follow the gospel—working for peace, justice, and truth—there will come a point when we will make enemies. And rather than discarding their humanity, we are held to the higher standard of loving them. At least Jesus didn't say we have to like them! It's a tough word, especially these days.

So how do we do it? How does Joseph do it? How does Joseph grow to forgive those who have betrayed him? There are a couple things in his story we can pay attention to. The first thing he does is he feels the pain. Forgiveness is painful. It is a process of grief without a timeline. Count the number of times Joseph weeps. Seven times he weeps over the struggle to forgive his brothers—some before they come to him and some after. The book of Genesis ends with Joseph weeping. And on that last time—the seventh time—finally, his brothers weep with him. Here, however, the brothers who betrayed him are coming to him for mercy—they're hungry. And I don't know about you, but if you've ever had siblings or cousins who betrayed you, it would be awfully hard to be looking down on those who once looked down on us, and not give them a dose of their own medicine. But instead, Joseph weeps over them and offers forgiveness. As Dr. King once said, "We are only able to love our enemies to the degree which we are able to forgive them." The first thing to pay attention to is that Joseph weeps, offering forgiveness. Ending the cycle of retribution.

The second thing Joseph does is he somehow renames the event as something God was at work within. Now we must be extremely careful here: it does not mean abuse, trauma and wrongdoing is part of 'God's plan.' Love never makes suffering a part of the plan. Instead, Joseph sees that the artistry of God is at work, offering mercy to redeem what has happened. Now the word for "mercy" in both Hebrew and Aramaic literally means, "womb-space." It is the space where God's mercy is trying to birth something radically new. It is a type of justice which has the power to heal both the oppressed as well as the oppressor.

A dear friend of mine is a chaplain to prison inmates in Canada. As part of his work he helps them to prepare for reintegration into society once they've served their time. (Again, in case you were wondering how this is funded, he lives in Canada.) One of the last steps of the reintegration process is a mediation between the offender as well as the victim and their families—if they are willing. My friend says that most of the time, the victims all desire the same things: First, they need for their story to be believed. Second, they need for the offender to be sorry for what they did and to not do it again; and finally, they need to have the power to name what would redeem the situation. My friend says that he has never come across anyone who at the end of the day wanted retribution—not once! What they all want deep down is to be able to forgive. It is a "womb-space" where the artistry of God's mercy is at work, trying to heal both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Now I don't have it all figured out, but what if forgiveness isn't about denial or moving on, but about saying, 'What happened was not okay and I am choosing to no longer be connected to it!'

What if loving our enemies is central to the gospel because it is about our being free.

And do you know why?

Because free people are dangerous to evil's existence.

Free people are not owned by the violence that attempts to control them.

Free people are unafraid to speak the truth to power in ways that exposes injustice.

Free people have the power within themselves to exchange brute force with soul force.

Free people are able to weep over the harm that has been done to them.

Free people are able to see God's "womb-space" even in the midst of the most horrific events.

Free people are able to channel their spirit-energy so the horrific events don't ever happen again.

And free people are dangerous to evil's ways because they can be hung high and stretched wide and still say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Free people are dangerous because free people, free people.

And friends, is not that kind of freedom worth fighting for?

If it is true that we love God only as much as those who we love on the bottom tier. And if it is also true that we can only love those on the bottom tier to the same degree which we are willing to forgive them. Then perhaps it is also true that the degree to which we are willing to forgive also measures the degree to which we are free. I know it is hard, especially these days. I know it is painful. But the reward? We are in God's "womb-space." Loving as God loves. And friends, is not that kind of freedom worth fighting for?