

What's the Price of Gold These Days?

Luke 6: 27-38

Don Lincoln

I returned Tuesday from a couple weeks' vacation – for which I say “Thanks!” I'm grateful for time off that comes as part of my terms of call. We often go somewhere warm in February, and try to stay long enough to forget what day of the week it is. You should know, however, I did set my alarm for Sunday, so I could live-stream the worship with you – and still keep track of who's in the sanctuary even when I'm on vacation!! 😊

While others I vacation with bask in the sun, I keep my easily sunburnt self in the shade and read novels. Thrillers; suspense; whodunits – fun reads; good escapes. Things that take me to a different place. A good two-week vacation is about eight books!

This year, one book was titled “By the Rivers of Babylon” – an old one by Nelson DeMille (who I had not read much before) – about the hijacking of two El Al Concorde jets – you remember those drop-nose supersonic jets that flew from the late 70's until around 2003?

Anyway, I don't read novels on vacation in order to get sermon ideas. But – wouldn't you know it, that's exactly what happened. In the middle of that novel, out in the desert where the Concorde had been forced down in the biblical area once known as Babylon, one of the characters recites the following prayer she had learned:

*O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will
but also those of evil will.
But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us;
remember the fruits we have borne thanks to this suffering –
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this;
and when they come to the judgement,
let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen.*

I read that prayer in the novel, and it sounded so unique, I Googled it, and found out it's a real prayer – known as the Ravensbrück prayer. It was written on a piece of paper found near the body of a dead child at the Ravensbrück death camp in Germany – a camp for women and children – where tens of thousands died during the Holocaust.

Read it again.

*O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will
but also those of evil will.*

*But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us;
remember the fruits we have borne thanks to this suffering –
our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity,
the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this;
and when they come to the judgement,
let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen.*

Imagine – someone capable of so much love amidst so much hate; so much mercy and forgiveness amidst an ocean of doubt, pain and horror. There is tremendous poignancy and power in those words. It's astounding.

Then imagine my surprise when a day or two later – after I finished the book and while still on vacation – I took a look at the lectionary passages for today, to consider what I might preach on (so I wasn't scrambling the minute I came into the office on Wednesday – so I would have a little idea what the four texts are and which one I might choose). And RIGHT THERE among the four was this text from Luke – “Love your enemies.” It was obvious where today's sermon needed to go.

Pastor Jon brought us into this “Sermon on the Plain” in Luke's Gospel last week. But here, after the blessings and woes, is the real heart of Jesus' message that day. Jesus commendation to “Love your enemies.” It's not one theme among many in our text – it is THE dominant theme.¹ The rest is explanation and application and implication.

For four thousand years the human race has believed survival depends on a system of rules and related punishments based on the notion of balanced retribution. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

It's in the Code of Hammurabi – from 2000 years before Jesus – 500 years before Moses. And the provision in the Hammurabi Code, is there to REGULATE the natural inclinations in retribution: “no MORE than an eye for an eye” is what it means. ONLY a tooth for a tooth. The Code knows our propensity in retribution. So the code establishes, when a wrong is done, the offender must pay; make amends; and the punishment should fit the crime.

You and I understand how systems like that work. BUT, it is into the midst of THAT human condition – Jesus speaks these enigmatic words about loving your enemy, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you and turning the other cheek. Ideas which signal a new code of behavior based not on retaliation and revenge, not on reciprocal morality, but instead on mercy and forgiveness.²

Here Jesus names what you and I know in our hearts to be true, but do not have the courage or creativity or inner strength to live out – namely that revenge and retaliation and retribution constitute – in terms of history and human relations – the most colossal of all failures, the greatest of all lies.

As someone once observed “An eye for an eye merely leaves two people blind.” The truth is – it doesn’t work. It doesn’t make things better. It doesn’t heal and create new possibilities. Hate breeds hate.

Maybe it’s time to really listen to Jesus. To entertain the outrageous notion that Jesus – with his “love your enemy” concept – is actually **THE** realist, the **only** pragmatist around, and the utopians - the really silly idealists – are those who continue to hold retaliation, revenge, hate your enemy, get even, give them what they deserve – as the best way for human beings to thrive.³

“They’re wrong,” Jesus says. His promise is, it doesn’t have to be this way; there is another option. And that option is that you and I can treat others the way we long to be treated. There it is – that old “Golden Rule.” Not the adulterated version that says, “Do unto others first, before they do it to you!” Jesus says, treat others as you yourself would long to be treated.

How many times have you and I expressed outrage at the faults of others – the mistakes others have made – crimes committed – hurtful actions done – and cry out, “Throw the book at them.” Righteous indignation!

That is, until you and I find ourselves guilty of the same or worse.

Suddenly, when it’s you or me in the wrong, we plead for mercy. We cry out for understanding. We offer up reasons – from our history, our background; “the outside forces got hold of us;” and we beg not to be locked up and have the key thrown away. Give me a second chance.” We beg for the redemptive thing – not retribution; or an eye for an eye – but the possibility of being rehabilitated by forgiveness, love and mercy.

Jesus invites us into that kind of world. Instead of a world where love deserves love, hate deserves hate, deeds good and bad are repaid in kind, force returned with force, violence returned for violence – Jesus calls you and me to a world where love and forgiveness are our rule. And they are what we are to give. For when you and I love and forgive we interrupt this endless cause-and-effect-cycle and create the possibility of something new. This is how the world changes. **THIS** is how resurrection happens amidst all the death of this world.⁴

Don’t get me wrong. MLK Jr once said, “Jesus didn’t say you had to like your enemies. How can you like someone who is threatening your children and bombing your home.” Jesus never said you should accept abuse. Loving your enemy and your abuser also means finding ways to end abusive behavior. But not with retaliation; vengeance; violence and hate.

MLK Jr. knew the power of love and mercy. In **Strength to Love**, King wrote this: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. Do to us what you will and we will continue to love you. Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight

hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves.....we shall win you in the process.”

Love alone has the power to resurrect the human heart from the place of hatred, anger, retaliation and vengeance. “Father, forgive them,” our Lord spoke from the cross.

If you read Jesus’ words in this text carefully, the fact of the matter is, we don’t do this – we don’t act this way – in order to win folks over. That’s God’s business. The point of Jesus’ commendation – to love enemy – is the healing and wholeness of all of US would-be disciples. The real beneficiaries of this attitude are NOT those who are no longer hated, but the ones who no longer live life out of their anger, their rage, their resentment and their vengeance. What always changes in this equation is the heart and soul of the one who stops hating and starts loving.

This call is a call to live contrary to our human nature, lived out of the power of the grace of God at work in our lives.⁵ That’s possible because you and I know, “...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” When God had every reason to turn away from you and me in anger, retaliation, eye for an eye – God does the opposite – God turns toward us in love.

Those who have received God’s mercy counter the evil in the world by giving mercy – EVEN, as Jesus says – to the ungrateful and the wicked – expecting nothing in return. In so doing, a new future is made possible as one’s enemies are placed in a previously unimagined reality – that they might be loved by us.⁶ When you and I live and act this way, Jesus says, we are children of God. We will be for others, as God is for us.

On a Sunday in October of 2015, Christopher Rhoads broke into Trinity Lutheran Church, Lansdale PA, in the middle of the night. Drunk and deeply depressed, he smashed vases, spread donated jars of tomato sauce around the narthex, broke communion tables, and ripped and burned hymnals, causing more than \$10,000 worth of damage.

When the vandalism was discovered the next morning, the police were called, and it was cleaned up in time for the 11:00 a.m. funeral. It took several days but Christopher was apprehended, arrested, and jailed. Within days the news of the break-in was all over the town.

That Sunday in the children’s sermon, the pastor mentioned that a neighbor who was struggling and not feeling good about himself had broken some items in their church. And he thought it would be a good to send him some cards to let him know that God loves him and so did the church.

So, the pastor, during the children’s sermon, distributed some paper and crayons and asked the children to draw something to let Christopher know that he is forgiven and loved.

The pastor brought the cards to Christopher at his hearing and told him that Trinity wanted to support his efforts at recovery. His initial reaction was one of surprise. He

thought they were there to add their disapproval along with everybody else in the room. Later they learned that one card drawn by a boy named Angel touched him the most. On the cover in bright colors are images of Christopher and Angel holding hands and drinking from juice boxes.

In the ensuing months, Christopher committed himself to an innovative court program focused on mental-health treatment. He graduated from the rigorous program and paid back the \$10,000 within two years. Christopher said, “What I found from them was forgiveness and love. I had always thought of religious groups as more fire and brimstone. It really opened my eyes; and probably saved my life because I got the help I needed.” Love, instead of hate. Mercy, instead of retribution.

Some of you may know the name of Corrie Ten Boom. That goes back a few years – early ministry days for me. The Ten Booms were a Dutch Christian family who harbored Jewish fugitives from the Nazi regime, until the entire family was arrested. Corrie’s book, The Hiding Place, a well-known book read in Christian circles, tells the story of their family’s ministry. Corrie and her sister Betsie – after their arrest – were moved around and ended up in, of all places, the Ravensbrück camp, where that prayer I showed earlier was written. It was in that camp that sister Betsie died – two weeks before Corrie was released from the camp. Corrie was released because of an administrative error. A week after her release the women in her group were executed.

Corrie returned to Germany in 1946 – not in 1956, or 1966, or 1976 after she’d been on a tour talking about her life in ministry – but in 1946 – and met with and forgave two Germans who had been employed at Ravensbrück, one of whom was particularly brutal to her sister Betsie. She knew what would set her heart free. Love, instead of hate. Mercy, instead of vengeance.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – not as they may deserve. That’s the Golden Rule. What’s the price of gold these days? That’s the price (pointing to cross in front of church) – love. Love, instead of hate.

And that’s priceless. May it be so in our lives. AMEN.

1. Fred Craddock, Interpretation Commentary on Luke 6: 27-36.
2. John Buchanan, sermon “The Toughest Assignment of All”; Fourth Presbyterian Church; Chicago, IL.
3. *ibid*
4. David Lose, “In the Meantime.....” WorkingPreacher.org
5. Charles Bugg, Feasting on the Word, Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year C.
6. William Loyd Allen, Feasting on the Gospels, Commentary on Luke 6: 27-36.