

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 24, 2019

Haven Evangelical Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40: Luke 6:27-38

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

A church had posted the sermon title for the coming Sunday. It read, "Following Jesus is Loving and Practical."¹ I don't like to criticize another pastor's sermon without hearing it, but really... practical? Are we reading the same Bible? "Following Jesus may be loving but it's surely not very practical." What Jesus said is right and good, but practical? We only wish. If our Lord's words and ways were common-sense, obviously-better-for-us-practical, it might be so much easier to live by them.

Instead, Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." "If you love people who love you, big deal. where's the grace? Sinners do that. If you do good to those who do good to you, where's the grace? Sinners do that. If you lend to people who lend to you, where's the grace? Sinners do that. You are to love and do good and to lend to people who will have absolutely no thanks to you, no gifts in return, no positive response, no love to you, no kindness to you. Why? Because that's the way God does it, that's the way God is. That's what Jesus said."² Practical?

Jesus tells us to take a step beyond the Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." We are not to treat others the way they treat us but as we would want them treat to us. "If you want to be my follower [," Jesus says,] "you do not let your life become dictated by the people around you. The people who reject you determine your life [and actions]? No. Friends define your life [and actions]? No. The people who hate you, the people who love you do not create your character [or identity.] Your character is created by the character of God. Now what is the character of God? God is kind [even] to the ungrateful and to the selfish."³ Oh, definitely not practical in the cause-and-effect ways of the world where "love deserves love, hate deserves hate, deeds both good and bad

should be repaid in kind, force must be returned with force, violence begets violence, and so on and so on.”

What if we heard these difficult commands of Jesus differently? What if we heard Jesus saying there's another option in this dog-eat-dog world. “Jesus isn't offering a set of simple rules by which to get by or get ahead in this world but is inviting us into a whole other world [,a world he will call the kingdom of God. And it is] A world that is not about measuring and counting and weighing and competing and judging and paying back and hating and all the rest. But instead is about love. Love for those who have loved you. Love for those who haven't. Love even for those who have hated you. That love gets expressed in all kinds of creative ways, but often comes through caring – extending care and compassion and help and comfort to those in need – and forgiveness – not paying back but instead releasing one's claim on another and opening up a future where a relationship of love is still possible.”⁴ Jesus asks us to join him in showing the world there is another option to an eye for an eye, closed-fisted way of life. Whenever we love our enemies, whenever we forgive, whenever we are gracious as God is gracious, we are interrupting that endless, death-dealing cycle. We are partnering with God to create something new.⁵

Pastor Barbara Lundblad wrote,

“When I hear these words from Jesus now, I often think about Matthew Shepherd's mother. Do you remember Matthew? He was brutally beaten for being gay, beaten because one man felt that he had made a pass at him. The man felt foolish and unmanly and so he got a friend to help him put the young college student in his place. The two of them beat Matthew over and over again. Then they tied him to a fence on a country road and left him alone in the freezing night. By the time someone found him the next morning and got him to the hospital, there was no way to save him. Matthew Shepherd died as hundreds stood in candlelight vigil outside the hospital. The two men who killed Matthew were arrested, tried, and convicted of the brutal hate crime. Proved guilty of first-degree murder, they deserved the death penalty in the state of Wyoming. But Matthew's mother came before the judge. She asked the judge to spare the lives of these guilty men. Who can understand what she had gone

through in all the agonizing months leading up to the trial? What mother could sleep with images of her beloved son tied to a fence, beaten and alone through the cold night? What sort of people could do this to another human being?

[Lundblad concludes,] "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "do good to those who hate you." When I hear Jesus' words now, I often think of Matthew's mother, her own life shaped by a gospel deeper than hatred, stronger than revenge. I don't know that I could do what she did. But I hold her in my heart as a witness to the power of the gospel. Such love is not practical, but it can change the world."⁶

Following Jesus — doing what he says and living as he lived --- has never been practical or easy. It's not the pathway to worldly success, wealth or fame. It IS the way to work with God to change the world, one little corner, one moment at a time. Jesus tells us that when we refuse to engage in revenge or retaliation... when we don't demand reciprocation for good or refuse to be a victim even when slapped in the face... then we are standing *with* him and *for* him. We are letting the grace of God flourish and overflow. We are helping to break the cycles of hate, hurt and hopelessness. "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return... Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Not practical or easy but right. Not practical or easy but possible as we let God's word, meal, church community and the Holy Spirit transform and change us. We are not patsies, we are not doormats, and we are not being passive when we follow Jesus. We are courageous, impractical champions for the kingdom of God, the God who know love is the way ---- God's impractical, powerful, redeeming way. Linda M Alessandri 2/23/19

ENDNOTES

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1. Barbara K. Lundblad, "Simple, Yet Not So Simple," February 18, 2001 posted on <http://day1.org>
 2. Fred B. Craddock, "On Being Gracious" The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Braddock Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011 pp 156-157
 3. Ibid adapted, pp 156-157
 4. David Lose, "Epiphany 7C: Command or Promise" February 22, 2019 as posted on "...In the MEANTIME" <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/02/epiphany-7-c-command-or-promise/>
 5. Last sentence is adapted from David Lose, "Epiphany 7C: Command or Promise?"
 6. Barbara Lundblad, "Simple, Yet Not So Simple" February 18, 2001 posted on <http://day1.org>