

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Luke 6:37 to 42 (Turn the Other Cheek)

Today's gospel drops us in the middle of Jesus' sermon on the plain with its blessings and woes you heard last Sunday. Jesus continues the sermon with "Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you." There are six words for love in the Bible, each with a different meaning and use, yet all six are translated into the one single English word, "love." The word used here for love, "agape" in Greek, does NOT mean romantic love, liking, or even friendship. What it does mean is whole-hearted, unreserved, unconditional desire for the well-being of the other. Nothing is held back. There is no hesitation, no calculation of costs and benefits, no expectation of receiving anything in return, no pay offs. There is only total desire for the well-being of the other, for their good. How does that change our understanding of "love your enemies?"

You might oppose some of their behaviours. You might speak and act against some of what they stand for. But if you agape your enemies, the ways you express your dislike and opposition will also express your total desire for their well-being. Jesus gives three specific suggestions for how to agape our enemies: first; do good, act with righteousness, truth, justice and honour; secondly bless, speak well of, praise, confer a favour on; and thirdly pray, lift up to God on their behalf. That's quite an onerous responsibility.

Jesus continues with; "If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek." Jesus is NOT telling us to be doormats; to passively accept abuse. Absolutely NOT! Rather, he is teaching a way to non-violently resist abuse. Those listening to Jesus would know instantly who the "anyone" was that he is referring to. Those who struck one on their cheek or took away their coat were either masters or soldiers. Striking the cheek was how a master disciplined a slave or servant; the way he asserted his authority; the way he put the servant in his place.

And there was a proper, prescribed way to do this. The slave would stand facing his master who would strike the right cheek with the back of his right hand. Because this was the proper way to strike the cheek, doing it any other way would be a loss of face. So imagine what happens if, after having been struck on the right cheek, the servant stands there and silently turns his head, offering his left cheek? It becomes impossible to strike the left cheek with the back of the right hand.

Standing there offering the left cheek actually becomes an act of resistance. The master is unable to discipline the slave in the proper, accepted way - his powerlessness is exposed for all to see - and with that he is shamed and dishonoured. And, more importantly, the reality that the master and slave are not in a right relationship reflected by the Good News and with Jesus' teaching is exposed for all to see.

"If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also." Not just anyone could take away your coat. Typically, this would be a soldier, and the taking of the coat would be a form of extortion. Since the "coat" refers to the outer garment worn at the time of Jesus, giving away one's "shirt," one's inner garment, would leave one naked, an embarrassing situation.

But again, what is really being exposed here is the injustice. Giving one's shirt as well as one's

coat, exposes the injustice of having the coat taken away in the first place. For Jesus' listeners these two scenarios demonstrate how to agape your enemies. These are powerful non-violent ways to expose injustice.

Jesus expands his teaching "to love our enemies." The key phrase here is: "Expecting nothing in return." This is a call to extend to **everyone** the generous give-and-take that is usually reserved for immediate family and close friends. Imagine a world where the economy changes from "I give you this ONLY if you give me that," to "I share this with you knowing that you, or someone else, will generously share with me whatever I need. Today this could be the sharing of vaccines with impoverished nations, especially on the African continent. It could be "paying it forward" at a drive-through fast food place by paying for the person behind you, expecting nothing in return. It could be donating to the food bank.

Luke spells out what is expected of those who belong to the Jesus community as he continues the sermon with one of Jesus' most quoted and misquoted lines. "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged." Jesus is NOT saying anything goes. Some things are better than others, and some ways of behaving are better than others. Judging can be perilous at times and needs to be done with humility. Yet, we are called to judge and to choose.

Often this line is quoted by people who don't like what they are being told. A woman is confronted by a friend for lying on her application to join a prestigious club. "Judge not, that you be not judged." In other words, you can't tell me what to do. Jesus was not telling us to be stupid or undiscerning. He fully recognized that making judgements about good and evil, right and wrong is a necessary part of life. Don't critically condemn other people; don't put anyone down. Here is how life works: like chickens in a barnyard, we humans have a pecking order. We rate others and ourselves according to age, wealth, occupation, physical appearance, gender, and many other characteristics. We tend to peg ourselves as being higher or lower than others, preferring to be as close as possible to the top.

Some get to the top by putting others down – sometimes directly and sometimes more subtly. They say things such as: He's too old. She's fat. Did you see her tattoos? She cheats. They don't have much money. They have too much money for their own good. Her voice is so irritating. He still speaks with an accent. He looks gay. They live on the wrong street. They're not well-educated. They have strange customs and rituals. She's black.

Far too often, this is how "the other is treated," especially our Asian, Indigenous and black siblings. This month we celebrate Black History month, a time to look at our historical racist treatment of our Black neighbours and a reminder of the tremendous contributions they have made to our North American continent. Too often our TV shows have created detractive pictures of black communities. We see them in ghettos, projects, gangs, committing various crimes. Yet atrocities such as the those that took place in Tulsa, to ravage a black community in Tulsa with its own "black wall street," banks, beautiful homes and furnishings, doctors, lawyers cannot be justified. The "other" in the case was harshly judged and condemned because of their skin colour and success. Take a look at the insert in your bulletin to see some of Black accomplishments that have impacted all our lives.

By being critical, we make others look worse so we can look better. Jesus says, stop this right now! Do not judge. Do not condemn. Do not put others people down. The issue is not about truthfulness in what we say. The issue is about the desire for the well-being of the other. It's not about making necessary judgments, but about making unnecessary criticism.

This is a teaching against the kind of stereotypical part of the gossipy way we pigeon-hole and stigmatize people-who-are-different-than-us. This kind of judging labels others; removes their humanity; and relieves us of the moral obligation to treat them as we would any friend or family member.

The overall message is to break down all the stereotypes and barriers we erect to distance ourselves from others; enemy, stranger; sinner; someone not like us. Instead, Jesus calls us to agape, to totally desire the well-being of all others for their own good, expecting nothing in return.

There are great benefits from following Jesus' teaching. If you are not critical of others, they will be less critical of you. But, more importantly, God will not be critical of you. If you have a generous and gracious attitude toward others, God will not need to humble you and put you in your place. It's a win-win situation. Jesus takes this a step further when he tells us to: "Forgive others and you will be forgiven." Those who forgive are more likely to be forgiven by others, and will be forgiven by God – something we find almost word for word in the Lord's Prayer. Be generous to others and God will be generous to you. This refers to more than material things. It includes compassion, forgiveness, love, and caring – the more meaningful and important things in life.

Jesus also speaks to the kind of leaders and teachers needed to lead us. The leaders we choose to follow will either help or hurt us in our quest to lead a righteous life. Whether a person chose to follow Adolph Hitler or Mother Theresa makes a big difference in the way they learn to treat others. "Can a blind person lead another? Won't they both fall into a ditch?" To live according to Jesus' teachings, follow a leader who treats people as God desires. Choose those who will lead and shape us to be non-judgmental, uncondemning, forgiving, giving, and compassionate.

Finally, Jesus gets back to his main point and adds a little humour. Can you imagine the crowds laughing as he talks to them? While he was often serious to the point of intensity, he used lots of humour when he taught. One of his frequent and popular approaches was with exaggeration. He talked about trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle – a tough task to accomplish. He then talks about removing a foreign object out of the eye.

Imagine going up to someone and saying: Excuse me, but I think I see a speck of dirt in your eye and it must be very irritating. Here, I have Q-tips I carry for an emergency like this and I'll get that speck out for you. So, please just come over here in the light, hold your eye lids open, look straight ahead. I'll get it out for you.

Jesus says that it is the critical condemning person who sees the sins and faults of others and volunteers to do something to fix them. Not that the person doesn't have a speck in their own

eye. They probably do and it would be helpful to remove it. The trouble is that there is a log in their eye that is tearing the cornea and distorting their face. Their vision is completely blocked. And they can't see it. And they think they can remove a speck?

In Jesus' humour the crowd can see themselves. He was talking about them. He was talking about us. We need to deal with our own shortcomings before we worry about the shortfalls of others. "And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, 'Friend, let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."

Judging and condemning others can easily become addictive. You do it once, twice, and before you know it, it becomes a habit, a way of life, a part of the personality. You start taking down another person's life and it makes you feel important and powerful. This is not the way of Jesus. He wants to turn us around by putting a roadblock in the middle of our path of condemnation, criticism and self-righteousness. He teaches us a better way – the way to be godly people – people who plant and build rather than cut down and destroy.

If God can look beyond our faults and love us, take care of our needs, show mercy and grace, then by following Jesus' teachings, we can take those great attributes into our own hearts by looking beyond the faults of those around us, by loving them, taking care of their needs, and showing them mercy and grace. God's forgiveness proclaimed, transforms our hearts to faithful service to God and neighbour.

Jesus' word for us today is "I call you to live your lives out of an alternative vision or reality. I call you to live your lives as lives that reverse the values of this culture. I call you to love your enemy; turn the other cheek; give your possessions to those in need and judge not the lives of others. Be merciful even as I am merciful. I have come to nourish your entire life with my mercy. I have come to empower you with mercy in order that you may, indeed live a new kind of life in this world. May God's grace be proclaimed and may he have mercy upon us so that we may have mercy on others. Amen.