

“Loving Enemies”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, lead pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
March 3, 2019

Matthew 6:27-38

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

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

This text stumped me when I was young. Enemies?! It didn't seem to apply to me. I didn't have enemies. I still don't. Except...

OT scholar, Walter Brueggemann suggests putting this week's text in conversation with one from the book of Genesis, about Joseph and his brothers. Jesus' goal is always for us to find ourselves in his teaching. Today, he says, “Do what Joseph did.”

Joseph's story is a long one. We'll focus on the brotherly reconciliation found in Genesis 45. Decades have passed. Everyone's older. The spoiled teenager has learned compassion. The brothers have just returned from fetching youngest brother Benjamin. Seeing him, and them, Joseph is overwhelmed. “I'm your brother Joseph! The one you sold to Egypt.” He weeps loudly and forgives them. “Don't be angry with yourselves.”

These men had sold their brother into slavery. Joseph had spent time in prison because of them. Yet he comforts them! He loves them!

We could stop there and say, “End of story. Jesus says love your enemies.” We could pretend it's that easy. It's not. Joseph had surely wrestled with God about his anger at the life his brothers had condemned him to. Wrestling with God seems to be a family trait.

In his holy wrestlings, Joseph has listened to his life. It all makes sense now. He can see God's fingerprints everywhere.

People say that hindsight is 20/20. Like Joseph, we can look back and see God at work in our lives. Being outside of time, God's knows what's ahead and acts in ways that are mysterious yet good, wondrous.

Joseph now recognizes God's hidden purpose. His own fears and angers are trivial next to God's

intention. And his life has become larger than he ever imagined. So he chooses to forgive, and to embrace the larger life that God offers him.

A large life – that’s what God intends for each of us. That’s what God intends for us as a church.

Those who tuned in to last week’s General Conference may feel joy or sorrow with what happened in St. Louis. Bishop Jung wrote afterward that “People of faith – laity and clergy, male and female, old and young, local and global, straight and gay – did the best job they could to serve the church and the God they love.” It wasn’t enough. Not yet. But as with Joseph’s story, we can trust that there are more chapters to be written. God does not give up on us nor does God allow us to give up on each other.

When we are hurting, when we live from a place of fear or anger, our lives become small. We grow distrustful. Life in God, though, breaks beyond our little boxes of control. We find that God’s purposes lead us beyond ourselves so that we can give and forgive. And we can lead lives beyond anything we imagined.

To what larger life might God be calling us today, this year?

Jesus asks us, “Are you willing to listen?” We must listen to hear the lessons he has to teach. Then, we notice that he does not say tolerate your enemies. He says *love* them! Live beyond personal animosities. Do what’s in the interest of the community. Responding in kind to someone’s hatred or anger only compounds the brokenness. Instead respond with kindness and generosity. Live into God vision of relationships restored. It doesn’t matter who or what you are or they are. God loves every person unconditionally. As Christ’s followers, we are called to reflect that love.

Think of it this way: Since we’re created in God’s image, we should reflect God’s love, compassion and justice, because “love, compassion and justice” is the face of God. Right?

We need to pay attention to the portrait of God that our actions and attitudes paint.

If we are to convince the world about the truth of the gospel, we need to live in love each day, in all parts of our lives. To live in love, we need to *see all the people*, with all *their* ways that are different from ours.

It’s not easy, especially since Jesus does not call us to *feel* love. Loving your enemies is about action, not feeling. Our kindness or generosity, especially when it’s undeserved, might lead someone closer to others or to God. We decide whether we’ll be mean-spirited, or whether, like Joseph, we will let God transform us.

Margaret Ann Crain tells about her first experience as a church educator. She was appalled by the resistance some members displayed. They walked out when the pastor began to preach each Sunday. They stirred things up when the council had a decision to make. She says,

“I did not love them! But I also did not ever ask them to explain their point of view. ... I didn’t listen to them. As I look back now, 40 years later, I regret that response. If I had listened, I could have become more compassionate ... They were faithful church members. I suspect that they had some faith-filled reasons for their resistance. ... important lessons that all of us needed to hear. I will never know because I did not love my enemies. ...”

We can be thankful for the many people at GC who did listen and who gave their all to walking in another’s shoes. Society seeks to divide us on so many issues but we can choose differently.

Jesus says, “To you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies.” He doesn’t simply say, “Love your enemies, do good, and bless and pray for them.” First, he challenges us, by saying “Hear me!” Then as now, many tune out words that are hard to hear, and Jesus’ message is a hard one.

Love the ones hardest to love. This is Kingdom language. God operates from a place of love and as Christ’s followers we’re expected to do so as well. Jesus does not ask us to agree. He simply states it, then offers examples. How the crowd must have questioned this teaching! If I let my guard down, the enemy may win. They may threaten my community’s well-being – or my family’s. If I give my coat away, who will give me a coat? I’ll be cold! We may wonder, yet we are called to be compassionate as God is compassionate.

Everything about loving our enemies is counter-cultural. Jesus invites us to value people differently. He invites us into a larger life in a new community of love, compassion, and justice.

Do we, as a community, trust God enough to let go of our own ideas of what’s fair and unfair, right or wrong. Do we trust God enough to forgive whenever we have the chance?

The UMC asserts that: “The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced.”

Life may sometimes beat us down, yet we know that God will have the last word, We can count on this.

Joseph didn’t know if he’d even see the next day when his brothers threw him into a pit. When he was in prison, God was with him. When Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt, hungry, God was with them too. And God created a tale of reconciliation and forgiveness, and restoration

God does this in our lives today as well, taking our joys and sorrows and shaping them to good purposes, for restoration, justice, and compassion.

So, as you consider your siblings, your noisy neighbor, or your boss, as you reflect on GC or our nation, first listen. Closely. See and hear the ones who are different. Feel their pain. And love them.