

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Sunday, February 23, 2025

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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." ~Luke 6:27-38

There's a lunch place where I like to stop on the way home from school. A few months ago, I had an experience there that I'm still thinking about. I was in line waiting to place my order. The person two in front of me had ordered a large salad, which, as it turned out, cost \$5 more than the small. He was complaining that it didn't look like \$5 additional and there was an edge in his voice that made it uncomfortable. There was a tense feeling in the air. Until something happened. The man in between us put his hand on the agitated person's shoulder, smiled a warm smile, and said "I just got a nice bonus. Let me throw in the \$5." The first guy was of course surprised and at first refused the offer but the other guy insisted. It wasn't long before the three of us ended up in a long conversation sharing the tough times we'd all been going through, including some pretty profound challenges for Joe, the first guy. And what could have been another TikTok video wound up instead in a misty-eyed apology and hugs.

Now that's in many ways just a small vignette, an ordinary, daily moment. Yet the gesture at its heart manages quite palpably to echo today's gospel. If we had a sign on our front plaza with sermon titles as one often saw a generation or two ago, today's might simply say *Small Steps*. Small, ordinary, daily steps. Give to someone who needs it. Show mercy. Listen more and speak less. Forgive. Remember that we don't know what it's been like to walk in another's shoes. Turn the other cheek and perhaps even. . .love your enemy.

This is Jesus's kingdom message, as he so insistently and constantly reminds, instructs and even urges us: he has gathered us for the kingdom, and he has gathered us to equip us as co-creators of the kingdom, to build and shape and nurture it alongside him, as led by him in teachings such as this one. It isn't easy work, and he lets us know *that* quite consistently as well. And yet it is our greatest and truest hope. God's peaceable kingdom restored. A place built for human flourishing, for wholeness and healing, for unity and union. A home to which we are all welcome and into

which we now welcome others. *All* others, even those, as Jesus puts it, who don't appear to love us, and who are hard for us to love. I admit to having fallen into a place in that brief moment in a Trumbull deli of finding the first customer hard to love as he complained about something that seemed *not-worth-complaining-about* to me. What a bracing and beautiful moment to see how much a smile, gentle touch and kind gesture utterly changed the moment. Anger yielded to connection. And, in just a few moments, it yielded to a moment of healing and even of hope.

Small steps. Yet so powerful. One of my earliest clergy mentors took this passage from Luke very seriously and adopted the practice of giving truly to anyone who asked. And, he would always tell us, that didn't always mean money since many of us carry very little cash. "Say hello," he said, "linger and chat for a minute. Just the simple gift of presence and connection can mean so much. It can be a game-changer. Stop if you possibly can when someone is stranded on the side of the road. Just even to make sure everything's OK or to see if they need something really essential like water."

Rich memories still linger of the beautiful memorial service for our beloved Jeffrey Meyer at Battell Chapel in January. Most unforgettable for me were the words offered by his children Cara and Zane. Once, as we learned that morning, both children were in the car with their dad and they were running a bit late to something important to them. As they were driving, Jeffrey saw a dog on the side of the road that looked like it might be hurt. Cara and Zane realized quickly that all thoughts of getting to their destination would need to be put on hold. Jeffrey pulled over, stopped the car, walked back to see if the dog was OK, and then, after assessing the situation, decided a trip to the vet was in order. I can just imagine being in this situation as a child thinking "Oh, come on! We're going to miss it!" And I can imagine learning maybe only many years later that this small step, this simple gesture, had been the only thing that really mattered.

OK but what about *forgiving*? Or *loving one's enemy*? Maybe these *don't* feel like small steps. Maybe they feel like large or even impossible steps. I opened my phone to scan through news stories this morning and was stunned when I read the very first headline. "I forgive them for what they've done," it read; 'If I didn't, the hate would eat away at me.' A mother reflects after the murder of her daughter Brianna." I had to get to rehearsal for a concert later in the day so I bookmarked the article, but not without remembering the extraordinary story of Mary Johnson, which it so vividly recalls. Mary's only son was killed in 1993 by a man named Oshea. In the wake of her son's death, Mary struggled. "I found myself filled with hate. I saw Oshea as an animal," she would write years later. "For a while the only thing that kept me going was thinking of getting retribution. But then I'd think of my faith, and I'd find myself saying I'd forgiven Oshea because the Bible tells us to forgive. One day I saw one of his family in the news, and I realized that I hadn't actually forgiven. The root of bitterness ran deep, anger had set in and I hated everyone."

It wasn't too long after that day, as Mary tells the story, that she happened to read a poem about two mothers: the mother of a boy who was murdered and the mother of his murderer. The poem moved Mary deeply and inspired a vision she believed was from God. Mary realized she wanted to meet Oshea. And so she located him and asked if he'd be willing to talk with her. He agreed. "We talked for two hours," Mary later wrote, "and he admitted what he'd done. I could see how sorry he was and at the end of the meeting, for the very first time, I was genuinely able to say that I forgave him. He couldn't believe how I could do this and he asked if he could hug me. When he

left the room I bent down saying – ‘I’ve just hugged the man who’d murdered my son.’ Then, as I got up, I felt something rising from the soles of my feet and leaving me. From that day on I haven’t felt any hatred, animosity or anger. It was over.” Mary and Oshea wound up becoming family to each other and living as next-door neighbors until Mary’s death. They founded an organization together called From Death to Life. It works to build bridges just as Mary built such an extraordinary one to Oshea.

These are moving stories. And they leave us of course, finally, with a question. How do *we* live out this gospel call? How can we too *turn the other cheek*, and love the enemy? How do we live out this gospel call when every day can feel like an assault as voices coarsen and noise intensifies, as voices demonize and even dehumanize, as division grows ever deeper? As lots of money is being made painting us into corners, baiting us into drawing lines with *me* on one side and *the enemy* on the other? We struggle to answer yet today’s gospel truth continues to speak, amplified by the voices of wise souls among us. And so I close today with words written by Craig Loya, wise soul indeed; seminarian here at St. Thomas’s in 2002, dear friend of the parish, currently bishop of Minnesota. Craig writes:

“Jesus’ words outline his program for life: Love your enemies. Don’t judge. Give, and it will be given to you. In a world where violence, vengeance, and holding on to what is ours rule the day, generosity is an act of resistance. Giving is a small revolution. We are made by a God whose very heart is reckless, foolish generosity. Faith is about asking that our heart is re-formed in the image of God’s heart. When you are feeling powerless, when you are feeling hopeless, when you wonder what can be done, try giving something away. Buy the coffee for the person behind you, regard the irritating coworker with compassion, pray for an enemy, fund some work of justice in the world. God’s project to heal the world with love is about turning our upside down world right side up. The practice of daily generosity, foolishly and recklessly given, is an instrument of that project. In days where hateful voices are all around, where fear and inward gazing close us off from each other, pray and ask that God would open our hearts to live with God’s generous abandon, until what passes for wisdom and power is finally and fully swept up in God’s love.”

Amen.