
WHAT I WISH JESUS NEVER SAID

LUKE 6:27-38

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2019,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

I have a confession to make. There are things that I wish Jesus never said. I love Jesus but why did he have to go and mess with our safe and comfortable life of discipleship and say, not once, but twice, “love your enemies.” He could have just said it once and we could have easily glossed over it, but he repeats it. Maybe it’s his way of telling us that it’s not very Christian to chant, “Go to hell Carolina!” or maybe it’s his way of encouraging us how to handle Duke’s basketball loss to Carolina the other night. I don’t know but I wish Jesus never said it because now we all have to deal with it.

Love your enemies? Really Jesus?! He must have forgotten what it’s like to be human by spouting off this “pious injunction [like a] utopian dreamer” or “impractical idealist” (Dr. King). Love your enemies? Lure you outside of sanctuary in a United Methodist Church in Durham with the ulterior motives of capturing you and separating you from your family, just because of your immigration status. Love your enemy? Sitting in a Bible study in an AME church in Charleston, SC, only to be greeted by gunshots from an attendee, just because of the color of your skin. Love your enemy? Super ridiculous high rates of sexual assault occurrences on college campuses all over the nation, including Duke. Love your enemy? Smile in your face, talk behind your back Christianity. Love your enemy?

Jesus looks crazy but he’s crazy for love and his command is very practical, down to earth, incarnational theology for our lives. Love your enemies. As you sit here, “Is there anybody with whom you are out of harmony today?...do you see the face of someone who comes between you and God? (Howard Thurman). Barbara Brown Taylor says, “My enemy is created in the image of God. I just gotta live with that. It sucks, but I don’t think there’s any fine print on that one.” I wish Jesus never said what he said. There he goes again—challenging and critiquing my comfy Christianity. But we don’t have to listen. Jesus makes that clear—“But I say to you that listen...” That means not everyone is listening. Not everyone wants to hear this because it’s too easy to live by the rules of retaliation—we are hated so we hate, we get cursed at so we curse back, we get abused so we abuse. But if we listen, there’s another way, another word spoken twice. “Love your enemies.”

The road of lethal retaliation may feel really good actually and we may think what Jesus says is all about the enemy—saving them, redeeming them, treating them better. We might raise the question, “What about me, God?” In the heart of the civil rights movement and struggle against racial segregation in the 1960s, Yusef Iman penned a poem called “Love Your Enemy”:

brought here in slave ships and pitched overboard.

Love your enemy

language taken away, culture taken away

Love your enemy

work from sun up to sun down

Love your enemy

Last hired first fired

Love your enemy

Rape your mother

Love your enemy

Lynch your father

Love your enemy

Bomb your churches

Love your enemy

Kill your children

*Love your enemy
Forced to fight his Wars
Love your enemy
Pay the highest rent
Love your enemy
Sell you rotten food
Love your enemy
Forced to live in slums
Love your enemy
Dilapidated schools
Love your enemy
Puts you in jail
Love your enemy
Bitten by dogs
Love your enemy
Water hose you down
Love your enemy
Love,
Love,
Love,
Love,
Love, for everybody else,
but when will we love ourselves???????*

Love for everybody else. Love for the enemy but what about love for me, God? What about me? What about loving ourselves? Just as Jesus inverts the norms of the day in his “blessings” and “woes” right before this love command, he alters the way we should think about loving enemies.

The paradox is that love for your enemies is not only about them; it’s about you. Loving your enemies is a form of loving yourself. It’s not only about what love will do for or to your enemy but it’s about what love will do for and to you. It’s remembering how hate destroys the hater and the hated. It’s remembering what James Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, “Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated, and this was an immutable law.” When you love your enemy, you are actually loving yourself too. Jesus is trying to save us. Loving your enemy means you will not destroy the other person nor yourself. You’ve heard, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” I’m saying do to yourself what you want others to do to themselves. Love your enemy because “Hate, in the long run, is about as nourishing as cyanide” (Kurt Vonnegut). Jesus gives this command because he doesn’t want us to kill ourselves and become the very thing we hate, thus becoming the enemy, by hating in the same way the enemy has hated us.

Loving your enemy is a way of avoiding the enemy within us all. If we aren’t careful, when we look into the mirror, we may see our enemies, if we allow hate to turn us into the enemy. One Sunday, a priest was preaching on this same biblical text. He said to his congregation, “I’ll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives...So raise your hands...if you have many enemies.” And quite a few people raised their hands. “Now raise your hands if you have only a few enemies.” And about half as many people raised their hands. “Now raise your hands if you have only one or two enemies.” And even fewer people raised their hands. “See,” said the priest, “most of us feel like we have enemies.” “Now raise your hands if you have no enemies at all.” And the priest looked around, and finally, way in the back, an elderly man raised his hand. He stood up and said, “I have no enemies whatsoever!” The priest was so delighted by this that he invited the man to the front of the church. “What a blessing!” the priest said. “How old are you?” “I’m 98 years old, and I have no enemies.” “What a wonderful Christian life you lead! [the priest said]. Tell us all how it is that you have no enemies.” And the elderly man said, “All the bastards have died!”

Love your enemies, when they are living, because it will not only affect them but also you. Loving your enemies is not about changing the other but how love can change you and free you from the enslavement of

hatred and bitterness. In a sermon on this very topic, the Rev. Howard Thurman said, “It may be that you feel you have the right to be out of harmony because you know you have never done to anybody what was done to you. Yet you must find a way to love your enemy if you want to be whole; not if you want to redeem your enemy but because you want to be whole. A part of you is caught in the deed which he [or she] has done and you must get out of it to restore wholeness to yourself.” Jesus knew that love can set us free, that love can change the enemy and also change us. This command is about us.

This command is about us becoming more like God, more merciful and less judgmental, more unconditional and less reciprocal in our relationships. Jesus sets the theological context for his command: God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.” The command “Love your enemies” is set within the unconditional, inclusive mercy and presence of God. In the ancient Hellenistic world, relationships were viewed as reciprocal—I do good to you with the expectation that you will do good to me in the future; I give to get; I love in order to be loved. But Jesus urges another way in light of kingdom of God. A way not based on reciprocity but unconditional redemption, restoration, and relationships which love, do good, and give, expecting nothing in return. In this way, a person is kind in order to be kind, not to receive kindness. One loves just to love, seeking nothing in return. In this way, we reveal that we are God’s children. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” I wish Jesus never said that because “Mercy is releasing people and circumstances from the recrimination they deserve” (Ron Allen). And boy is it great to see our enemies get what they deserve!

Love your enemies just like God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Its counterintuitive then and now. Real love is unconditional. God is not fair, God is love, and there is nothing that we or our enemies can do to earn it, knowing that none of us deserve it. We don’t get from God what we really deserve. God loves us even when hate is the refrain of the world’s chorus. This God is all-inclusive when it comes to love and Jesus’s command to love enemies is a path toward broadening the borders of our hearts beyond the erected walls we build to block the other out.

When you follow this God, it means that “when the opportunity presents itself for you to defeat your enemy, that is the time which you must not do it”(King). When you have the upper hand that is not the time to give them your backhand! You must not seek to destroy because by doing so, you will also destroy yourself. God’s love is kind and merciful and extends life to all—your enemies and you. God’s love builds community, restores our common humanity, and affirms human dignity, worth and value, rather than reveling in dehumanizing mean spirited tactics. Love is for the oppressed and the oppressor, the righteous and the wicked. “Love your enemies” is a call to the wideness of God’s mercy, knowing that what you do to someone else, you are paradoxically doing it to yourself.

Jesus calls us to become bigger like God. Like James Baldwin said, “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.” Even when some want to get rid of God, God never gets rid of us because God is love and larger than us. God loves enemies. God loves us. God loves you. God loves and loves and loves.

And it is this love that will save the world, our nation, and our relationships. This love will never let us down, will never end, will always hold us, help us, save us, redeem us. “What the world needs now is love...not just for some but for everyone” (Jackie DeShannon). “Love your enemies.” That is something I wish Jesus never said but without it, we all would be dead, because as the apostle Paul teaches, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:10).

Love saves. Love lifted me when nothing else could help, love lifted me. Henri Nouwen was right, “For Jesus, there are no countries to be conquered, no ideologies to be imposed, no people to be dominated. There are only children, women and men to be loved.” And later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus demonstrates this when he says, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...” He loved his enemies for nothing in return, for where God is, even on a cross, love is. Like or not, God is unconditional love. And there is no future for our world, our nation, or our lives, without this love.