

Year C – 7th Sunday after Epiphany

Pastor Megan Floyd

February 23, 2025

Grace and peace to you from God, our Creator, and from our savior, Jesus Christ, who longs for us to be consumed by love. Amen.

This passage is remarkably beautiful for the way it draws us into Christ's vision of justice... and of course... love.

But... that doesn't make it easy.

It's a well-known passage... love your enemies... turn the other cheek,... but it often misrepresents Christians as people who will and should continue to subject themselves to abuse.

It is *definitely not* that.

I can remember, even as a child, I would hear this and think... nope... no thanks... if someone slaps me and I turn the other cheek, then I'll get slapped twice. No, thank you.

What I have since learned is that this passage is really about justice, and holding others accountable for their abuse and harm... but doing so in a non-violent and loving way.

Retaliation and violence cannot drive out evil... only love can do that.

After all... even those who perpetrate harm against their neighbor, or community, or even the whole country... even those people are loved by God, who desire for their hearts to be remolded by love.

Still doesn't make it easy.

This passage is a continuation of the sermon on the plain that we got into last week... the blessings and woes...

Blessed are the poor and hungry... blessed are the powerless

Woe to you who are rich and full... woe to you who are well thought of according to the world's standards.

...But 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.

We *must* read this command to love our enemies *through* the lens of Jesus' flip of all we understand about the world... and about who is blessed and who is issued a warning.

He says, 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged.'

To cast judgment on another person is to view them, for whatever reason, as unworthy of God's gifts... to consider them as less than the beloved child of God that they are.

Jesus issues blessings and woes, and a call to love our enemies... as a way to call us into a more just way of living that honors *all* people, regardless of status or any of our human categories.

And this is huge for us in our modern American culture, but it's arguably a bigger deal for those first disciples... because the culture that Jesus is preaching in is an honor-shame culture. It's not quite the same way here and now... but for them...

To be abused was a cause for shame, but to respond the way Jesus suggests shines a light on the abuse, and holds the perpetrator accountable for their wrongful actions...

To respond the way Jesus suggests is to demand justice and dignity.

He says... if anyone takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt.

In that culture, to be naked was shameful, but to be someone who *caused another* to be naked was more shameful.

Jesus said, if anyone strikes you on the cheek – and in Matthew, he specifies, strikes you on the *right cheek*, offer the other.

Well, most people are right-handed, so to strike someone on the right cheek would mean they back-handed them...

This was how someone would strike a slave or someone so low in status that the abuser would not sully the palm of their hand.

But if you then offer the other cheek for them to strike, it would require an open hand,

...In doing that, they are demanding their abuser face what they did and strike them as an equal... thus throwing off the shame and exposing wrongful violence.

If someone takes your goods... stealing from you... Jesus said, do not ask for them back, it is then considered a gift. The shame of being a victim is turned into honor for one who is generous.

And again... it exposes the wrongful theft.

Jesus is not preaching suggestions for passive weakness... not at all...

To respond this way takes courage, and commitment to the way of Christ and strength in knowing that calling others back into right relationship brings healing to whole communities.

Jesus is offering a way to level out power imbalance and call attention to injustice.

Jesus is offering a way for us to create space for a pause... an examination of actions, a call to accountability... space for confession... forgiveness... and reconciliation.

Jesus is calling us to follow a way that does not tolerate evil, but instead, it exposes the evil actions and invites the perpetrator back into right relationship with their community... using love.

God does not want us to destroy our enemies... God wants us to love them.

Earlier this week, our siblings in Christ at St. Luke's ELCA church in Park Ridge, Illinois, experienced some of this world's hatred and abuse.

Vandals destroyed their sign, which featured the logo for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – the ELCA – and the logo for Reconciling in Christ, which, as we know, stands for justice and inclusion of our LGBTQ+ siblings.

While it may have been a random act of disrespect... which was carried out in two separate acts...

we cannot ignore that our Lutheran witness and commitment to standing with the vulnerable and marginalized has recently been nationally vilified...

...and our ELCA siblings across this country are feeling the effects of that from those who are motivated to intimidate based on perceived orders from their leaders.

As I read about this church, I was deeply encouraged that, in the face of harm, they are leaning into Jesus' command to love others, to be welcoming to all, and to bear witness to the Gospel.

Their pastor wrote, "In a world increasingly marked by division and fear, we are called to stand firm in the radical grace of Jesus.

If this was meant to discourage us, let it do the opposite. Let it strengthen our resolve to be a beacon of hope, justice, and love.

We will continue to proclaim love of neighbor through word and deed, showing with our lives that love is stronger than fear.”

Friends... this is what it looks like... to turn the other cheek.

To pause... and take a breath... to call for accountability and leave room for confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

This is what it looks like to follow in the way of Christ, to commit to love, to stand for justice, and to trust in the kind of costly grace that calls us into action.

To not let the hardness of the world... harden our hearts against our enemies... or our neighbors.

And no... it is not easy. And yes... there is risk.

Which is why we cannot... and do not... accomplish this work on our own.

It is only possible with the strength of the bonds that form within a community that follows the way of Christ *together*...

And, most importantly, it is only possible by the will of God, who has called us to this path... and promises to accompany and guide us, to comfort us in our grief, and to transform our hearts with love.

Our God, who loves us beyond measure, knows that if we hold onto fear... bitterness... suspicion... and hatred... we will be overcome... consumed by that hatred.

So let us lay all that down at the foot of the cross... and in doing so, know that we cast a holy light... a loving light... onto the injustice of our world...

...and, with strength that can only come from God... let us come together to call those who perpetuate evil and violence... back into love....

Let us call them back into just relationships... offering healing for our communities... and lives transformed by grace.

Jesus' sermon on the plain teaches us that what God wants for us... what Christ longs for... is for us to be consumed by mercy and compassion... consumed by love, and for that love to reshape the world.

And so... though it is not easy... let us, together, love our enemies and pray for those who cause harm.

Amen.