

RADICAL LOVE IN A RISKY WORLD:
RADICAL LOVE IS RISKY
Luke 6:27-36

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“Some people see things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’ Others dream of things that never were and ask WHY NOT?” Those words of George Bernard Shaw contain the sermon for today.

Jesus blew the lid off conventional morality in the 1st century and the 21st century by instructing his followers to ‘*Love your enemies.*’ The first hearers were shocked by it. Theologians through the ages have tried to explain it. The survival of humanity today may depend on our living it. I want to talk today about ‘why not?’ Why not love our enemies?

WHY NOT THE WAY OF LOVE?

When the Apostle Paul wrote his immortal love poem in I Corinthians 13 to the cantankerous church at Corinth, he began by saying “*And now I will show you a more excellent way.*” If the way of love is a more excellent way, if the way of love is a better way of life, if the way of love is the superior way of relating to humanity, then why not? Well, why not? Some of us would immediately have an answer to that. We would say it can’t be because:

SUCH LOVE IS IMPOSSIBLE

Lucy says in a Peanuts cartoon, “I love humankind; it’s people I can’t stand.”

If by Christian love we mean the fellowship of kindred minds, a mutual friendship of all people, a common bond of likes and dislikes, then you are right. Loving all people like that is absolutely impossible.

How many close friends can one person cultivate? That’s why I am always a little suspicious of people who consider everyone they meet a close personal friend. That is why I have become more cautious through the years in what I promise potential church members. If you want a close personal friendship with the Senior Pastor, you probably need to join a church of about 25 people, not a congregation of 6,300.

The experts are right. It is impossible to relate to more than about ten people at a time. To love everybody is to love nobody, and die of loneliness. If love means “liking,” then it is impossible.

SOME SAY SUCH LOVE IS IMPRACTICAL.

If “loving our enemy” is the same as “sleeping with the enemy” as Julia Roberts does in the movie by that title, then love is a very dangerous thing.

Imagine the chaos if great numbers of people in this congregation were to ‘fall in love’ with each other. We would have a commune, not a congregation. The

damage would be devastating, as it proves to be in the rare instances where it happens.

Furthermore, “loving your enemy” is not an invitation to masochism and abuse within the covenant of marriage. That’s why divorce has been permissible within the circumstantial will of God since the beginning of time.

WHAT IF LOVING OUR ENEMY IS IMPERATIVE?

What if the survival of humanity is dependent upon it? By love I mean a disposition of the will that seeks to treat all persons as God would have them treated.

By love I mean loving as God loves: not sentimental sweetness, but merciful righteousness. Not just anything goes, but seeking liberty and justice for all: for the saint and the sinner, for the pious and the prisoner, for our friends and for our enemies.

So Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount as recorded both in Matthew and Luke, *“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies.”* Was Jesus an indiscriminate idealist or a practical realist? Was Jesus talking about the Kingdom of Heaven in some far off land or the Kingdom of Heaven that comes to earth as we pray for it to come each week?

What if this new, extravagant, extreme, radical, radical commandment is an absolute necessity for the survival of civilization? Why not a more excellent way? Why Not?

WHY NOT AN END TO HATE?

Why not? If it’s going to happen in world affairs, it’s got to happen here first. Why not an end to hating? And you say, “But how?” Hate is the natural response of hurt. And I say yes, but there is another step. We hurt, we hate, and we are not finished until we heal. You haven’t made the full circle, neither have I, until I deal straight with my hurts, I come to grips with my hates, and I find the path by the grace of God all the way to healing. Jesus tells us how to get started. *“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies”* and here is how:

DO GOOD TO THOSE WHO HATE YOU

I have a copy of John Wesley’s rule hanging in my home office. It goes like this:

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can,
In all the ways you can, in all the places you can,
At all the times you can, to all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.

Our founder was serious about doing good. Are we?

On January 30, 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. came home from a meeting to find his home had been bombed while his wife and children were inside. Crowds full of anger swarmed in the front yard. After a while, Dr. King came out to address the crowd. This is what he said: “We are not advocating violence. We must love

our enemies. What we are doing is just and God will be with us.”

Do good to those who hate you. There is nothing new about that, it’s all over the Bible. Romans Chapter 12 says it perhaps as well as anyplace. “*Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.*” Is that at the heart of your life and motivation? “*Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.*” But how? Jesus, it’s nice for you to say love your enemies but let’s get practical. How do you do that? And the scary part is that he tells us how to do it. *Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.*

BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE YOU

Whether or not it is clear to you, some people do not like you. They don’t like the way you walk, the way you talk, the color of your skin, or the choice of your religion. They are jealous of what you have, the way you think, and the company you keep. If Jesus had not anticipated us having some enemies, why would he have talked so much about loving them?

The facts are we have given some people a reason to hate us. We have done those things we ought not to have done, and failed to do the things we should have done. We miss the mark of our high calling.

So what are you going to do with those who hate you? How are you going to deal with the people who hate you? Are you going to join the crowd and demonize them too? “Let me tell you what that so and so said about me... I may not be perfect, but I’m not as bad as they ...” I don’t have to finish that sentence. You’ve said it a hundred times haven’t you? Is that what we are going to do?

Clarence Darrow once said, “Everyone is a potential murderer. I have not killed anyone but I do frequently get satisfaction from reading the obituary.”

Or will we find a better way? Will we learn to bless instead of curse? Which will it be — God bless you or God curse you? Which are you going to say? Love your enemies. And we say how, I don’t know how to do that. Jesus says, well, let me tell you how. *Bless those who curse you, be good to those who hate you, pray for those who mistreat you.* It’s all right here in the Bible.

PRAY FOR THOSE WHO MISTREAT YOU.

People come to me from time to time and say, “You know, I just can’t love my enemy.” I say, “You are absolutely right, neither can I.” Now that we are in the same boat there is only one way we can do this and that is with supernatural help. That’s why the only way to reach this ethic is through the discipline of prayer. Pray for those who hurt you. Can you do that? You know you are moving along on this thing when you get to the point you can pray for your enemies.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—World War II—fighting Hitler, decided to leave the safety of this country and to go back to Germany and lead a church in the resistance movement against the Nazi regime. It cost him his life. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in that great book [The Cost of Discipleship](#), “We are approaching an age of widespread persecution. Our adversaries seek to root out the Christian Church

because they cannot live side by side with us. So what shall we do? We shall pray. It will be a prayer of earnest love for those who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred, and who have perhaps already raised their hands to kill us.” What will we do? We can pray. Why not? Why not a better way of life?

WHY NOT TRAVEL LIGHTLY?

Why not travel lightly? Isn't that what's going on here about lending, and turning the other cheek, and doing to others as you would have them do unto you? Isn't it a kind of lightness of being? Why not travel lightly? You immediately say to me, but what about self-defense? I know, self-defense is a natural human instinct. There is enough mammal in the best of us to defend our territory, take care of our own, and protect ourselves from harm. Who could expect us to do anything else than fight for the right to take care of ourselves? If we are not predators, we are at least protectors.

My question is this. If the only means of self-defense is retaliation then where will it end? So a suicide bomber blows up a crowded bus in Israel. Israel responds by destroying an entire Palestinian village. The Palestinians react with more suicide bombers. It's been going on for centuries. It didn't just start the last few years. Sooner or later somebody has got to stop it! If it's cheek for cheek, will we not eventually run out of cheeks?

Let me explain what I mean by turning the other cheek. What I mean by that is not some sort of masochism or martyrdom. “Wow, hit me again. It's good for me and I'll get the joy of forgiving you.” That's crazy. That's not what I'm saying.

In fact, you ought to go back and read I Corinthians 13. Remember Paul said, *“Even if I give up my body for martyrdom and have not love, I gain nothing.”*

I am saying it's going to take strong, loving people to break the chain of hate. Anybody can strike back. Will somebody travel the better road of reconciliation?

“So, if someone takes your coat, give them your tunic as well.” What did Jesus mean? What was he trying to say?

Remember the famous French musical Les Miserables, Victor Hugo's story? Jean Valjean is a thief in search of personal redemption. No one will give him a chance except a Bishop of the Church. He takes him in, has him dine on fine china and expensive silverware, sends him to bed with his best candlesticks. The temptation is too much for this lifelong thief. So he takes the silverware and runs. Soon there is a knock on the Bishop's door. The cops have the robber and need only the Bishop's identification to throw Jean back in prison. But the Bishop surprises everyone. He brings the candlesticks and says to Jean Valjean, I gave these to you as well. They are silver like the rest and would bring you 200 francs. I intended for you to take them. Here, take them too.

What would it take for us to have that “lightness of being” and that “suspension from things” that might empower us to live in love, not fear? The reason we are

so defensive is that we are scared. We are afraid somebody is going to take from us what is ours. Jesus had radical things to say about that, which is really hard for us American Christians to understand.

E. Stanley Jones once asked Mahatma Gandhi why he refused to become a Christian when he so regularly quoted the words of Christ. Gandhi replied, "I don't reject your Christ, I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

When will we who call ourselves Christian, become what we call ourselves?

Amen.