

***A Sermon preached on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 based upon Luke 6:27-38.***

Let's remind ourselves of what proceeds what we just heard:

Jesus once more goes apart to pray, this time to a mountaintop where he spends an entire night in prayer. He calls the "twelve" from among the dozens of disciples and then proceeds to teach the disciples about what it means to follow in his way.

Last week we heard the series of blessings and woes that indicated that with the coming of the kingdom of God, the world is being turned upside down: the proud will be brought low and the humble raised up.

And now this: the teaching that is the hardest. Love your enemies.

If we love only those who love us – we are no different from the rest of the world. Pretty much everybody loves people who are good to them. Even drug lords from drug cartels love those who love them.

So I want to say something that may be challenging: If we don't take seriously this most difficult of Jesus' teachings we are essentially fakers if we call ourselves Christians. It doesn't matter how often we evoke the name of Jesus, or how often we go to church, even how much good we do for the church. If we aren't taking seriously Jesus' command to love our enemies we are fakers. "Posers" I believe is the word the younger people uses. We're committing identity theft.

Now having said this I need to immediately add that there are plenty of times when I'm a faker – a poser – guilty of identity theft because often I try and pretend he never said any such a thing.

It is a hard, hard teaching. It goes against our natural instinct. You could say it is an impossible teaching. On our own, we can't keep it. Loving enemies requires a power that is not our own -- the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that brings us back to prayer, and how often we hear in the Gospels of Jesus going apart by himself to do nothing but spend hours on end bringing his entire self before God. That's how he was able to go to Jerusalem and offer his life up on the cross – the ultimate expression of love of enemies.

Jesus didn't just talk the talk – he walked the talk.

You're probably familiar with the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It began on December 5<sup>th</sup> 1955. I was a nineteen-day-old that day – a baby living just 250 miles directly west in Jackson, Mississippi. It was my mother's birthday.

The boycott began when a brave woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white person and go to the back of the bus and was subsequently arrested, because that's what the law said was required.

The Black community quickly responded by organizing the bus boycott. It was designed to hit the people who made these unjust laws in the pocket book. Black folk made up more than half of the riders. Without black folk buying bus tickets, the bus company was going to take a major hit in terms of income.

It required a great sacrifice, however on the part of the black folk who relied on the buses to get to their jobs. For many it meant getting up at least an hour earlier so they could make the long walk across town required to get to their jobs, and then making that same long walk home in the evenings.

Martin Luther King was a 26 year old Baptist pastor newly arrived in town, having just received a Phd from Boston University. The Black Community turned to the brilliant and charismatic young preacher to be their leader – the face of the movement.

But he was just a babe – in well over his head.

The white people in the city – at least the majority of them – weren't pleased with the boycott, to put it lightly. In short order King began receiving anonymous death threats in the form of dozens of phone calls to the church parsonage where he lived with his wife and ten week old baby.

Late one night eight weeks into the boycott King was physically and emotionally exhausted, hitting what he described in his autobiography as a "saturation point" culminating with a particularly disturbing, hate-filled late night phone call. He couldn't sleep. Sitting at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee in his hand and feeling absolutely overwhelmed King tried to think of some way he could take his family and slip just away. Trembling, King bowed his head and began to pray.

*"Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. Now, I am afraid. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."*

Shortly after praying these words, King experienced the presence of God more powerfully than at any time before in his life. He heard a voice deep inside him saying, "Stand up for justice and I'll be with you every step of the way." A great calm descend upon him.

Three nights later King was at church with his wife and baby daughter leading a packed church service encouraging his weary flock in worship when word arrived that King's house had just been bombed. King and the whole congregation rushed down the street to the smoldering parsonage.

King stood on the front porch of his still burning house with the people gathered before him. The people were enraged and ready to commit violence. Led by the Holy Spirit, King proceeded to give a powerful speech declaring that as they stood strong in resisting the oppression and injustice they were suffering they must remain committed to the way of non-violence, keeping faith with Jesus.

Historians describe the speech as a turning point in the civil rights movement. But King testified in his autobiography that the actual turning point occurred three days earlier when he sat at that kitchen table in prayer and experienced his fear give way to the powerful love of God.

The boycott persisted non-violently for another ten months until finally the white leadership of the city gave in to the demands of the Black Community.

When we hear Jesus' teaching about loving the enemy and in particular "turning the other cheek", our common reaction is: *"Well that's all fine and good, but I for one am not going to be a doormat!"*

And neither should we.

But if we understand what Jesus was demanding of his followers we realize he wasn't calling us to be doormats. And the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott illustrates this.

For the Black people of Montgomery in 1955 there were basically three options. The options mirrored those available to the Jewish people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century who suffered under the oppression of the Roman soldiers that had invaded their land.

The first was to be a doormat, which was to do nothing and put up with the injustice.

The second was to unleash their pent up rage and take to the streets with violence. The result of this would have been a blood bath, and in all likelihood it would have been their blood most often shed. In 70 AD this option was taken by Jewish people and the result was the total annihilation of the city of Jerusalem.

The third option was to take the path that involved faithfulness to Jesus – firmly resisting the injustice, but refusing to engage in violence.

We think the *"turn the other cheek"* business expresses the very epitome of what it means to be a doormat, but for Jesus it meant the very opposite: it meant refusing to be intimidated – refusing to cower. It involves looking into the eyes of the one who has harmed us and declaring:

*“So you feel compelled to stoop to the level in which you would slap my cheek in order to dominate me? Here is my other cheek. Slap it too if you must. But I won’t back down.”*

To stand so strong requires great commitment and a willingness to sacrifice. It involves a steadfast refusal to be drawn into a way of seeing the world that according to Jesus is fundamentally out of touch with the deepest reality – one, in which people are seen as mere objects to be used rather than what they truly are: precious, beloved children of God.

It means keeping in mind that deep down inside the person we have defined as “enemy” has a soul. In loving this person, blessing them, praying for them we are appealing to that part of them that has gone into hiding – that place where they are made in the image of God.

Now thankfully you and I don’t live with Roman soldiers patrolling our streets, and we don’t live under the kind of oppression that the Black people of Birmingham, Alabama were living under.

But in our own arenas we too have “enemies.”

Sometimes they are co-workers in who seem constantly out to get us.

Sometimes we can view people who see the world through a different political lens or set of beliefs can as our enemies.

And sometimes our enemies can be for a time our most intimate of connections: spouses and family members, friends. Sometimes with the people we are most emotionally invested in there is a thin line between love and hatred. It is the people who know us best who know best how to push our buttons. Some comment -- some misunderstanding – and affection gives way to serious hurt and a desire for vengeance.

You might think it would be easier to practice “love of enemy” in these settings. After all, we’re not dealing with the cruelty of Roman soldiers or people intent on fire-bombing our houses.

But it still can seem pretty impossible. When somebody lashes out at us our instinct is to lash back. When somebody views us like an object to dominate rather than as somebody with a soul our instinct is to view them the same way.

So this brings me back to the two things I said at the start.

First, we’re not let off the hook. If we don’t take seriously Jesus’ teaching about loving our enemies the honest thing for us to do is to own up to the fact that we really aren’t Christians -- we don’t really believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior – that we’re fakers. Posers. We’re practicing identity theft.

And as a church if we don't take seriously this teaching, then we have just deceived Renee, Brian and Sandra regarding the faith community of which they have just become members.

I chose my words carefully here: I say "take seriously" rather than say "we can only call ourselves Christians if we consistently love our enemies" because the reality is we will fail time and again. But what matters is whether we get up off the ground when we fail and try again. What matters is whether when we find ourselves unable to "love our enemies" in the present moment we recognize that we need to be in ongoing conversation with Jesus about this unfinished conversation.

And the second thing is: this impossible teaching throws us back on the necessity of taking prayer more seriously. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can begin to make some bit of progress in learning how to love our enemies.

So Lent is a good time to try to take prayer more seriously. If you have been reading my daily postings in preparation for Lent you know the theme I'm lifting up is "getting free" – broadening the freedom that is ours as beloved children of God.

There is nothing that quite expresses such freedom as the ability to rise above our instinctual reaction to want to harm those who harm us -- to choose love when hatred is our instinct. This kind of love is always an act of freedom.