

SERMON: The Ultimate Challenge

TEXT: Luke 6:27-38

Reality television seems to be taking over the air waves. It used to be just cable TV, but now even the networks are carrying the competition shows especially. Dancing with the Stars, The Voice, America's Got Talent, American Ninja Warrior, Cake Boss, Top Chef, The Ultimate Fighter. I don't really watch any of them except while I'm channel surfing for something else. But I've seen enough to know that people can train themselves to do absolutely amazing things, from death-defying stunts to super-human feats to never-before-seen athletic accomplishments.

Beyond reality shows, I know that Olympic-level figure skating keeps raising the bar in terms of performance expectations. It used to be that triple jumps were unheard of, but now some skaters are achieving quadruple jumps. And in gymnastics, the top competitors today are performing leaps and bounds (pardon the pun) over what was considered perfection thirty or forty years ago.

It is astounding what human beings can accomplish when we put our whole heart, mind, body, and soul into it!

Of course, many of the examples I've given are well beyond what most of us here could ever dream of. You may be thinking like I am, "It's too late for me." On the other hand, we've all heard stories of marathon runners in the 80's, so let's get moving, people! Not going to happen, I know.

Well, as we move closer to the season of Lent and remember the trials and suffering that Jesus endured, we often find that the bar is raised for us in living a life of faith. Jesus begins to speak to his disciples more harshly with rebukes such as "Get behind me, Satan," and teaching that only those willing to lose their life will save it. The road gets more difficult for Jesus and for us. Comfort is traded for sacrifice, and we may begin to wonder if we have the strength we need to follow Jesus to the cross.

I once interviewed with a church, and I asked a question about how the congregation sought to respond to the problems of the world. The committee agreed that most of them go to church to get away from the world, to find respite and sanctuary and comfort. While these are certainly worthwhile and necessary things for a church to provide for the weary and heartbroken, there are also times in which we need to face the harsh realities of life and be challenged to remain

faithful as we do. The world is not going to change unless individual citizens are willing to change.

In the Biblical stories we heard today, from Genesis and from the Gospel of Luke, we are confronted with what I would call **THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE** in our walk of faith.

In Genesis, we learned that Joseph – who had been sold into slavery by his brothers years before – is now in a position of power in Egypt. With a famine in the land, he has an opportunity to get his revenge and send them away into a life of poverty and possible starvation. And why shouldn't he? They were not merciful to him in the past; why should Joseph be merciful to them now? If this were an action-adventure movie, we'd be cheering for him to give them just what they deserve. Let them starve to death.

But Joseph chooses mercy. His experience has taught him that God can take tragedy and evil and redeem it. God can bring healing and new life out of an act that was meant for destruction and death. Having received such mercy from God, Joseph is able to forgive his brothers. He explains to them, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many

survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” Joseph then sends his brothers to bring their father, promising, “You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there... so that you will not come to poverty.”

Joseph has faced THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE, and has undergone a powerful transformation. Many people would call him foolish for showing love to his enemies, for blessing his abusers and doing good to those who hated him.

This is the very challenge that faces Christians today, spoken by Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain: “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Love your enemies. Do good. Bless. Pray. This is what it means to love.

Reading on in the passage, we encounter some troubling words, including, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” I researched this verse carefully, as this goes against the idea that we should love ourselves, which I firmly believe Jesus endorsed. Here’s what I found.

First, we should note that Matthew's version of this saying is a bit more specific: "If anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek...." This is an important correction. As one scholar explained, "Jesus lived in a right-handed world where left hands were reserved only for unclean tasks." To hit a person on the right cheek with your right hand would require a back-handed slap. Such a blow connotes an insult, not a fistfight, and was the way someone in power would reprimand a subordinate, like a master to a slave. But to strike your equal in such a manner was socially and legally unacceptable, carrying with it a huge fine. For a slave to turn the other cheek to his master would be an act of defiance, because it would require the master to use his left hand, thereby committing an unclean act.

(Leah Watkiss, Defiance, Not Compliance: Turning the Other Cheek, cpj.ca)

In teaching us to love our enemies, Jesus did not mean that we should allow ourselves to be abused or submit to evil acts. We need not comply with or give in to our enemies. However, nor are we to seek retribution. Instead, we are to resist. Looking again to the story of Joseph, love *does not* require that we invite our enemies to come near; however, love *does* require that we feed them, lest they starve to death.

It is natural to want to hurt the person who has hurt us; it is a very human reaction. But, I'm sure you've heard the advice that it is better to *act* according to your own values than to *react* according to another's behavior. In other words, don't stoop to their level. Though we like to joke about it, the Golden Rule is not to "do unto others *as they have done unto us* or *before they do unto us*." But, as Jesus said – and as many other religions also teach – to "do to others as you would have them do you." Treat others the way you want to be treated.

One commentary explained it well: "Rather than a person hating in response to hatred and loving in response to love, Christian behavior and relationships are prompted by the God we worship who does not react but acts in love and grace toward all. This is what it means to be children of God." (Fred B. Craddock, Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 90)

To love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us is **THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE**. It calls for almost super-human behavior. The question is, are we willing to put our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength into meeting this challenge placed before us by Christ?

The sacrifice Jesus made for our sake calls us to make sacrifices for his sake. If you plan on giving up something for Lent, let us practice giving up hate in favor of love. Let us let go of our desire for revenge and retribution and let us replace those emotions with fervent prayer. Let us lift up our enemies to the love of the Lord and to the glory of God.

AMEN.