

SERMON: Love Beyond Logic

TEXT: Luke 6:27-38

Making Valentine boxes for Valentine's Day is something many of us can remember from elementary school. For the annual Valentine's party you had to bring a Valentine for everyone in your class. You couldn't just pick and choose who would get a card and who would not. But I discovered that I could pick and choose what message I would send with my card. I remember carefully reading through the cards that we'd bought from the store. Some of them said, "Be mine," "I'm sweet on you," "You're my favorite Valentine." Those were the ones I would give to my friends and the people I liked.

But I felt so thankful that there were other cards that didn't gush with sentimentality, but said simply, "Have a great Valentine's Day," or "You're cool," or "Happy Valentine's Day, Buddy!" Those I felt comfortable sending to the kids who I didn't like. After all, I knew it was important to be honest, and I couldn't honestly say, "Be mine," when I would rather stay far away from a person. But I could force myself to at least wish them a happy day, in writing – if I absolutely had to. In fact, for certain people, I felt it was quite big of me to do even that.

After all, they'd never been nice to me, so why should I be nice to them? Why should I wish them a happy day when they'd never done anything but make my day miserable? Why should I send them a message of love when they'd never shown me anything but hatred? That doesn't make sense; there's no reason for it. As a child, I believed it was just not logical to be nice to someone who had never been nice to me.

Of course, that's a typical kid's response, isn't it? I was a kid then, and I hadn't learned what real love is all about. I didn't fully understand that you were supposed to love everybody whether they loved you back or not. It's a good thing that we all mature and grow out of that phase.... Or do we?

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 perhaps the greatest challenge in our walk of faith. We are called to LOVE BEYOND LOGIC. We are called to love our enemies.

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 undergone a powerful transformation and shown LOVE BEYOND LOGIC. 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 followers of Jesus have always faced. As we read from his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said: “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.

Sometimes we try to get away with just a prayer. But 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 Luke’s version of the saying is not quite as specific as the one in the Gospel of Matthew: “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 at 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 to 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 to pray for those who abuse us is LOVE BEYOND LOGIC. 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, consider a practice of 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.