

February 20, 2022

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

“Gospel Imperatives”

Luke 6:27-38

I’m preaching on our Gospel lesson and I’d like to start out by pointing out that there is a lot of Gospel good news here. Jesus tells us that *“your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”* and he continues with phrases like *“you will not be judged...and you will not be condemned...you will be forgiven...it will be given to you.”* *“Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.”*

I point out all the Gospel good news here because this section is called the Lukan Imperatives and we do not like biblical imperatives—at least our sinful nature doesn’t like them. Imperatives tell us what we must do. And these imperatives tell us to be like Jesus. Jesus is loving and selfless and sacrificial. Our sinful nature is nasty, selfish and greedy for gain. So when we hear the 18 different imperatives in this reading, the fallen part of us really cringes.

“Love, do good, bless, pray for, offer the other cheek, give, lend, judge not, condemn not, forgive, give again, love again...” the hits just keep on coming.

We have the penitential season of Lent coming up real soon and you could use this part of Luke to really beat yourself up and get you into that poor, miserable sinner mindset that we all like to manifest when we go up to get that soot on our forehead on Ash Wednesday. I mean, let’s face it, the idea of turning the other cheek really turns us off. Lending without a thought of repayment bristles against our financial sensibilities. Loving the person who is actively being our enemy just doesn’t work for us. To say this is difficult to do is an understatement of, well, biblical proportions.

But that attitude comes from the idea that by doing this you are somehow suffering loss. While that’s true according to the world, this radical call of Christ is to those who are following and hearing Him—those who belong to Him, who are not of the world. And to say this is loss is totally false according to we who are in Christ Jesus.

Consider what you have gained in that Christ has called you to be among the elect of God by virtue of your Holy Baptism. Examine the middle of our reading today as Jesus is saying to His disciples, *“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For **even sinners** love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For **even sinners** do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? **Even sinners** lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.”* Three times Jesus compares those who follow Him over and against the “even sinners,” as in you are no longer considered a sinner! You have gained right standing before God!

Knowing that you undeservedly stand righteous in God’s sight on the day of judgment leading into a blessed eternity, can you really consider any sacrifice in this life in following Christ as a loss? Hardly.

And when you look at this closely, Jesus is not asking anything that He Himself has not already given out of love for you and all creation. He loved His enemies—saved them in fact. He did the ultimate good to those who hated Him. He blessed those who cursed Him, turned the other cheek, gave up His cloak, tunic and was left naked on the cross. He did the horrible, ugly work of salvation for those who did not want it or deserve it. He did it for you.

Now that you hear and receive this Word of salvation these imperatives are not some horrible burden you must bear to gain salvation; this is simply how you are in Christ because you have received salvation. By God's grace you have been placed into Christ and now Christ enables you to be His love in all these ways to the world around you.

Is this easy for us to do? Not at all! It's real tough because of that aforementioned sinful nature railing against everything that isn't love of self. But this simply is how we are, how we must be, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus Himself brings up the Golden Rule: "*As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.*" We usually take this at face value to mean me and any other person on the planet. I'd challenge you to take it as Jesus being the "other". What would you have Jesus do unto you? Exactly what He did; love you and humble Himself to save you by sacrificing whatever was necessary to do so. Suffer persecution and injustice at the hands of sinners that sinners might be saved. This is what you are to do in return to Jesus, and as we all know, we do it to Jesus by doing it to the "others" He places around us in life.

Does this mean Christians are to be doormats to the rest of the world giving all our wealth away and letting folks walk all over us? Certainly not. Did Jesus let everyone walk all over Him? No. He confronted evil. He did not fall for the wily tricks by which those opposed to Him tried to trip up His ministry. So I think it's perfectly appropriate for we who are in Christ to use our God-given common sense to discern where and how we be Christ's love to our world.

But our attitude is summed up in Jesus's words, "*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*"

We have received the love and mercy of almighty God in our most dire need. We are to seek to show mercy to those in need, to those opposed to us, to those who don't deserve it. We are to love our enemies and be willing to suffer the abuse of those who would persecute us for being in Christ Jesus. We do not return evil for evil, but return good for evil, always.

It's not easy. But it's what Jesus did. It's what Jesus does to you this very day in once again declaring your sins are fully forgiven...for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Therefore we who now dwell in Christ are Jesus to the ungrateful and the evil around us. That's just how it is.

So remember this when you're out in life and people are being lousy to you, getting you aggravated and angry. Remember this when someone in need is placed in your path. Remember that these imperatives Jesus speaks are in fact Gospel good news given to those who are under the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

If you come at it from the world's way of thinking it's going to look like loss. If you determine that the world's way of thinking is correct...well, you're in a very dangerous place, because Jesus says it's different for those who hear Him.

But when you come at things from the perspective of the gain you've already received in Christ, well, things are different. "*Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.*" You have eternal life in Christ, and now nothing surrendered for the sake of Christ is loss.

I know it sounds kind of foreboding when Jesus says, "*For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*" But if you remain focused on the grace of God already measured back to you in Christ, the measure you use is Christ. And in Christ you simply are Christ to the world around you.

Amen.