

Luke 6:27-38  
(6:17-49)

February 14, 2010

## Love Whom?

During seminary years, Grace and I spent a summer at Koinonia Farm in southern Georgia. “Koinonia” is Greek for *community*, and here were people of different ages, backgrounds and races trying to live and farm together as a Christian community. They wanted to take Jesus’ teachings seriously and be a demonstration plot for Christian living. An example of discipleship as a community for others to see. In particular, here were black and white people in partnership together during the 1950’s and 60’s. This went along quietly until the civil rights movement burst upon the national scene. Suddenly about 12 years before we showed up, Koinonia became a lightning rod for local fears and anger as the old way of life and segregation became threatened. Harassment and hate calls began; then drive-by gunfire at Koinonia folks on tractors in the field, and finally the bombing of Koinonia Farm’s roadside produce stand. Now, here was a test. How do Christians, trying to follow Jesus as a Christian community, respond?

Jesus started all this with his Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6). Standing in an open, level place with his new disciples and a great crowd of people from all over, Jesus speaks to his disciples (and those in the crowd who might become disciples) about the coming reversal when God will cause the poor to be blessed and those who weep to laugh. In the meantime, he says, “**Love your enemies.**” Wait, stop, love WHOM? *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...* Whoa, that is a bad idea, crazy talk -- “Dear Enemy, be my valentine.” Isn’t an enemy by definition someone I should hate, at least oppose? Surprisingly, however, the great crowd kept still and listened to this -- I think because Jesus had been healing their diseases and curing their troubles, and they perceived the power of God in him. So they listened to this teaching for disciples: do to others as you would have them do to you. Even your enemy. *If anyone strikes you on the cheek (an insult), offer the other also (don’t respond in kind)... anyone who takes your coat (as in legal action or in payment of a debt), give them your shirt as well... give freely to those who beg or take from you.*

And no, he was not kidding. We expect fairness, giving people what they deserve. Shouldn’t we love those who deserve to be loved, who return our love? But listen to Jesus: *If you love those who love you, what credit is that? People who have no use for God do that. If you do good to those who do good to you, what’s the big deal? Even terrible people may do that. If you lend money, hoping to get it back with interest, so what? Everybody does that.* No. Love your enemies, those who do not deserve it or love you back. And forget retaliation. It used to be “an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth” -- I don’t get mad, I get even -- many still live by this (laws contain this, courts adjudicate by this). But Jesus brings a new ethic: “love your enemy.”

Why? Because: followers of Jesus respond to **God’s character**. Don’t take your cue from what others do to you. Take your cue from what God is all about. Which is mercy: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful* [vs 36]. Love your enemy because God is all about mercy! When you make yourself an enemy of God through sin and disobedience, God loves you. Do that to others.

Rather than hating in response to hatred and loving in response to love, be prompted by the God we worship. The God of mercy. Love your enemies. When President Lincoln advocated binding up the wounds of the nation after the Civil War with forgiveness and reconciliation, Thaddeus Stevens pounded the table, "Mr. Lincoln! I think enemies ought to be *destroyed!*" Lincoln said, "Do not I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend?"

Two worlds colliding: Here is a **new way of life**. Instead of "love those who love you and stay away from those who don't," *love your enemies and do good to those who hate you!* Instead of "give generously to the truly needy," *give to everyone who begs from you!* What seems wise common sense in the present world turns out to be foolish. What is obviously weak and dumb is shown to be the way of wisdom and righteousness. A new way of life is arriving with Jesus: A new attitude toward possessions and people. A new response to hostility. A generous mercy that seems out of place!

Picture a skater at a busy ice rink. All the others are circling sensibly in the same direction around the rink. But this skater goes this way and that with figure eights and joyful abandon, catching everybody's eye. This is the follower of Jesus: demonstrating a merciful love that is out of sync with the old ways. Grace and I did not remain at Koinonia Farm. We could have. But we thought church congregations like this could do some figure eights. Surely the church should be a demonstration plot for Christian mercy, showing others this new way of life.

*How?* How can a church or any of us individually love our enemies and do good to those who hate us, not to mention praying for those who abuse us? Maybe we can't. Except **with God what is impossible for us becomes possible**. We have seen it in the church: old enemies are now friends, the bread and cup passed among those estranged and divided, unlikely hands clasped with the words, *the peace of Christ be with you*. "The Christian life is no fairytale," said Bible scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier, insisting "in the power of God's Spirit *it can be lived.*" With God it is possible. Not easy. Not always effective. But possible. Says the poet, Franz Wright, "Christ turned water to wine, blindness to sight, death to life, and -- most improbable of all his acts -- hatred to love, and the desire for revenge to forgiveness." [quoted in [Context](#), Feb 2010, Pt A, p. 7] It is possible, by the grace of God.

During the time when Koinonia Farm found itself with many enemies, Clarence Jordan went into town to a livestock sale. The town's arch-segregationist spotted him and came over, stood about three feet in front of him, and yelled at the top of his voice, even above the auctioneer, "Here's that old Jordan fellow, folks! We ain't killed him yet, but we can kill him now. We got him here by hisself!" Clarence remembers: I looked for a knothole to crawl through but couldn't find one. Then the man raised his voice again, "You ain't nothing but a ---" (The comment about my mother's ancestry cannot be repeated here.) I felt my fist getting into position to respond. About that time, he used God's name in a way to give me a pedigree. Then he took a deeper breath and called me something else, and I noticed that he did have tonsils, and I thought that this would be a nice time to perform a public tonsillectomy. But somehow God gave me the power to restrain myself while the little fellow kept on calling me increasingly long names."

"Finally he gave up and went outside. Now there was big farmer sitting next to me and he said, *You know what?* I thought he was getting ready to take up where this little fellow had left off.

I said, 'What?' He said, *I want to know how come you didn't hit that little fellow? You could have beat the --- You could have really whopped him with one arm tied behind your back.* I said, 'I think that is a correct appraisal of the situation.' He said, *Well, how come you didn't hit him?* I said, 'Two reasons: One is purely selfish. If I'd hit that little segregationist, everybody in this sale barn would have jumped on me and mopped up the floor with me. And I just don't want my wife married to a mop. But the real reason is I'm **trying to be a follower of Jesus Christ and he has taught me to love my enemies.** Now I confess that while I had the minimum amount of love for this little fellow, at least I did him no harm.' And this old fellow said, *Is that what it means to be a Christian?*

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