

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen...**

Our gospel reading continues the Q material we talked about last week. Quotes of Jesus that some scholars believe may have written down while Jesus was teaching. And which later became parts of Luke and Matthew.

Most of the sayings in this reading are about as opposite to our notion of common sense as you can get. “Bless those who curse you... If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again...”

When we look at some of these sayings today, they make it seem as though Jesus is advocating that we should become door mats and just walked on, or worse, be punching bags. But there's something very nuanced happening in these verses that need more explanation.

Several biblical commentators are quick to point out that context matters, and for some of these sayings, Jesus is actually advocating a radically different alternative.

For instance, turning the cheek... We often think it means offering ourselves up to get hit again. Like being a punching bag. But in truth, it's much different. I had to dig into a lot of commentary this week. And because of the snow I had the time.

Striking someone on the cheek is an action between two people of unequal rank, usually a master and a slave, and the intended message is for the slave to remember his place. In other words, this gesture was to reinforce the distance between their two stations in life.

Let's remember two things, first of all, this example is being used in the context of a sermon describing leveling, in other words the bringing down of the lofty and raising up of the lowly.

And secondly, this situation is described after the admonishment to Love your enemy *as yourself*. This is a high standard! People we don't like, we often think in terms of being “less than” ourselves. In effect we dehumanize them. And this leads to interpersonal violence.

Loving your enemy as yourself means you don't think of yourself as any higher or lower than others. This is the epitome of leveling.

The “back-hand” slap was a message. And there were very prescribed ways to deliver it. The master could only use his unclean hand and strike the opposite cheek.

And by turning the other cheek, the slave absorbs the blow and prevents the master from delivering another one. The only way a master could deliver another “back-hand” slap would be to use his clean hand; which was not kosher. And could not slap with an open hand, because that would signify being equals.

In other words, by turning the other cheek, the slave is essentially saying I'm a human being like you; let's not treat each other this way. Do you see how leveling that is? Turning the other cheek is about asserting human dignity directly in the face of an action designed to keep people in their place.

This takes some bravery... And it's one way of addressing interpersonal violence in non-violent way. It is an action aimed at leveling, and the full humanization of both people.

Slavery is an evil thing, not just for the slave, but for the slave owner as well. In the biography of Fredrick Douglas, who was a slave and witnessed many beatings, he talked about the demon that slave owners acquired.

He was once sold to a gentleman in a neutral territory, who had married a northerner. He recalls his interactions with her, saying that she was the first white person who ever saw him. She initially treated him like a human being.

And slowly over time he describes how she became fearful and angry and learned to treat him like an animal. He describes her transformation into darkness, how a kind person became cruel, because of slavery.

What was always remarkable about Fredrick Douglas, was his insistence that slavery not only dehumanized the slaves, but also dehumanized the slave owners. For him, freeing the slaves also meant freeing the slave owners. Do you see how healing and leveling this is?

We've talked about slaves and slave owners; both groups being in bondage by human sin. That's something we confess nearly every Sunday. One of the ways we experience freedom from bondage, is in the confession, it's in the examination of our lives and seeing ourselves reflected in a mirror and when we don't like what we see, repentance happens...

We discover the will to make authentic and genuine change. We integrate our lives... And as repentant people, leveled and reconciled to one another, we can say let's not hurt each other anymore, let's treat each other with mutual respect and dignity.

And this fits a spiritual pattern, a pattern we often see in scripture that is counter-intuitive. The path to eternal life goes through death. The path to forgiveness goes through confession. The path to righteousness goes through sin. The path to the Kingdom of God goes through loving our enemies...

Do you see the cross-shaped pattern in all this? And the good news is that loving our enemies as ourselves is like resurrection, its counter intuitive, and it is the truth. Our God is always redeeming suffering and bringing wholeness...

In our lives we all seem to suffer some people more than others. Loving an enemy as yourself is a hard lesson to learn... And it's something I keep working on, and working on...

Quick story... I may have told this story before, but it's real... Several years ago, I had a neighbor in Austin that rubbed me the wrong way. He pretended to be knowledgeable about a great many things...

Everything he did, he did better than anyone else. He listened to better music than everyone else, he had a better motorcycle than everyone else... He was amazingly judgmental and self-righteous about it.

It was probably at the height of my dislike for this guy, when I was reading a book about how we often project our own junk onto other people. The very things we fear to be true about ourselves are those same things that bug us in other people. This book made me start to wonder why this neighbor bugged me so much.

And slowly, I began to observe my own thoughts, and indeed, I started to notice that I was judgmental and self-righteous. The very things I disliked about him! It was like seeing the log in my own eye... And what I saw was humbling and transforming. This neighbor that I didn't like-- actually became a gift to me.

I continue to struggle with this, but once in a while, when I'm aware of this tendency, sometimes I can let it go. And then something like grace happens.

It's a process of dying to self, a process of putting my self-righteousness on the cross and rising to be a new creation—new life.

Loving the enemy as yourself is an invitation for transformation. It is law and it is most certainly gospel. This is the work of the Holy Spirit; this is the process of Sanctification.

I was telling this story to a group of older adults a few years ago, a participant said, “I think that’s what happens when we get older.” And the others sitting around the table agreed.

Another person said, “I used to really dislike some people, but that’s not how it is anymore.” I really appreciated that wisdom! As we bear that cross of aging, that cross of suffering, miracles happen-- leveling happens... wholeness comes...

I see this kind of transformation or sanctification in so many people here and at both churches. I love Sunday mornings, I love seeing people walking in hugging one another; greeting one another, listening, supporting and caring for one another. This is a community that knows what it means to love.

When we love our enemy as ourselves, our hearts are changed, transformation happens, and like resurrection—we experience new life.

Hear these gospel words again...

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Amen...