

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

February 20, 2022 (7th Sunday after Epiphany, Proper 2, Year C)  
Luke 6:27-38

“Turn the other cheek,” Jesus said. “*Are you kidding?! And get treated like a doormat?*” we say. “Love your enemies,” he said. “*You can’t be serious!*” we say.

At first, Jesus’ words are baffling. Is he telling us to NOT RESIST someone who’s HURTING us? To turn our cheek and take MORE of a beating and MORE humiliation? Is he commanding us to be punching bags or passive doormats to be stepped on and crushed? Didn’t he understand victimization?

But here’s the thing: Jesus ISN’T KIDDING. He’s DEAD serious about these commands. So before we just dismiss them as pious idealism, let’s take a moment. What if we took them MORE seriously.

Ghandi did. In the MOVIE "Ghandi", the great Indian leader is walking one day with a Presbyterian missionary named Charlie Andrews. The two suddenly find their way BLOCKED by young thugs. The Reverend Andrews takes one look at the menacing gangsters and decides to run for it. Gandhi stops him and asks, "Doesn't the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the ... cheek you should offer him the *other?*" Andrews mumbles something about Jesus speaking metaphorically, and Gandhi replies, "I'm not so sure. I suspect he meant you must show COURAGE-- be willing to TAKE a blow, SEVERAL blows, to show you will NOT strike back, NOR will you be turned aside."

You see, what Jesus commands here is NOT PASSIVE at ALL, FAR FROM it; these are ACTIONS – actions with a PURPOSE.

We live in a world today that is EXTREMELY REACTIVE. Something happens or someone SAYS something and PEOPLE GO OFF! The extreme of that is road-rage, and that keeps happening down in the Cities. Somebody cuts someone off or SOMETHING, and someone takes out a gun and starts SHOOTING, on the FREEWAY.

The word of these times is OUTRAGE. People are OUTRAGED by WHATEVER the issue of the day is. It seems not a day PASSES when there isn’t SOMETHING people are OUTRAGED about. Someone strikes, and people strike back.

But just REACTING to what the OTHER person does GIVES that person POWER over you. THEY determine how YOU FEEL and what you do next. They CONTROL you.

Jesus says, “LOVE your enemies.... Turn the OTHER cheek,” not because it’s WEAK, but because it’s POWERFUL. It’s taking the power BACK, not LETTING ANYONE CONTROL you. It’s POWERFUL and COURAGEOUS.

Imagine a person hitting someone, and the victim takes the blow, straightens back up and looks them in the eye, without saying a word. And taking another blow, and just looking them in the eye again. Does that sound WEAK to you? Does it seem PASSIVE?

MORE to Jesus’ POINT is this story. On the evening of June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, walked into a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. When the group bowed their heads to pray, Roof, took out a gun and started firing. He reloaded 5 times. He murdered nine Christians, while they prayed, including the senior pastor. IMMEDIATELY after they arrested him, the families of the victims stood before him in court, and publicly forgave him. One family after another FORGAVE him. Not because they were WEAK, but because they were STRONGER than HE could IMAGINE. Not because they were PASSIVE, but because they were POWERFUL. They TOOK CONTROL of their lives BACK, and REFUSED to let anyone but GOD have POWER over them. Their FORGIVENESS sent a MESSAGE: GOODNESS is STRONGER than evil; LOVE is stronger than hate; LIGHT is stronger than darkness; LIFE is stronger than death.

I've seen this for myself MANY times. I knew a woman in one of my churches named Ellen. One of her children had been killed by a drunk driver. Ellen went to the man's sentencing hearing and said that she had FORGIVEN him, and she asked the court to be lenient on him. Ellen EMBODIED grace and forgiveness and generosity.

These stories SHOW us that forgiveness is not ONLY taking your life back; it's not JUST about you and me; it says something about who GOD is.

At one synod assembly, the Bishop (Tom Aitken) told a story about a woman named Mary Johnson, from North Minneapolis. This is how he told it:

Mary was the mother of an only son named Laramiun. ("Lore-oh-mee-in"). In the context of North Minneapolis' drugs, gangs and gun violence, her 20-year-old son Laramiun ended up at a party he NEVER should have been at. So, did ANOTHER youth named Oshea ("Oh-Shay"). He was sixteen. One sad and stupid thing led to another, and Oshea ended up shooting and killing her son. Mary's life was shattered. She had lived her life under the Lordship of Jesus, and his commandment to love. But this tragedy CHALLENGED her strongly held belief and tempted her to opt for a set of values FOREIGN to GOD'S values. She knew WELL the words of Jesus... but how could she LIVE *those words* right NOW at THIS time in her life, when she was so SAD and ANGRY at the seemingly UNSTOPPABLE CULTURE of DEATH?

Oshea, the 16-year-old who killed Mary's son, went to prison. He got 25 years in Stillwater. Mary knew that the HATRED inside her for Oshea was NOT part of the Kingdom of God. She said, "I wanted to HURT him, but I COULDN'T hold ONTO that. Jesus made me want to know what Oshea was like NOW and wanted me to TRULY FORGIVE him."

Mary had read a poem for her Devotions one night in which two mothers met in heaven. Each had a son who died young. Each told the other that if they could've taken their son's place, they would have. One mother was Mary, the Mother of Jesus; the other was the mother of Judas. And that was it. The Kingdom of God took hold of her anew. She made an appointment to SEE Oshea.

Mary FORGAVE him, and Oshea was so MOVED, HE was transformed. The two began to UNDERSTAND, and CARE for one another. Mary made sure Oshea had an apartment when he got out of prison. RIGHT NEXT to HERS. She keeps TRACK of him and HE keeps track of her. You should google Mary Johnson to read the whole story, but it ends like this: Mary Johnson wears a necklace with a locket that holds two pictures. On one side is her son, Laramiun, you turn it over, and on the other side is a picture of Oshea, "my OTHER son" she says. He says, "I love you lady, you're like a mother to me." "I love you too, son," she says. And her joy has returned.

A wise person once said, "Choose your enemies carefully, for you will BECOME LIKE them." So when we hit BACK the person who hit us, we become LIKE them. When we SHOUT BACK at the one shouting at us, we become LIKE them.

But Jesus says INSTEAD, we are "children of the Most High, who is KIND, EVEN to the ungrateful and evil." Jesus is calling us to be like our Father, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

I saw this on the internet. Think of it like this: You're holding a cup of coffee when someone comes along and bumps you, making you spill your coffee everywhere. Why did you spill the coffee?\*"Because someone bumped into me, of course!" you say.

Wrong answer.

You spilled the coffee, because COFFEE was in the cup.

If tea had been in it, you would have spilled tea.

Whatever's INSIDE the cup is what will come OUT.

So, when life comes along and SHAKES you up (which WILL happen), whatever's INSIDE of you will come out. It's easy to fake it and hide it inside a nice cup...until you get RATTLED.

So we have to ask ourselves – what's in MY cup? When life gets tough, what spills over?

Love, joy, gratefulness, and peace?

Or anger, bitterness, harsh words and infuriated actions?

Outrage and violence, or love and forgiveness. Which is it? YOU DECIDE!\*

We are children of the Most High God. We have GOD'S LOVE inside our cup, and our cup runneth over. Therefore, when life RATTLES us, we CHOOSE to love our enemies, do good for, bless, and pray for those who hurt us. Not because we are WEAK, but because we are stronger than ANYTHING the world can throw at us. GOODNESS is STRONGER than evil; LOVE is stronger than hate.

We know the END of this story, and for all the world's BLUSTERING, in the end, LOVE WINS.  
Amen.