

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

February 23, 2025 (7th Sunday after Epiphany, Proper 2, Year C)
Luke 6:27-38

It's a story that's repeated on EVERY elementary school playground, all over the world. Two, let's say, fourth-graders get into it during recess; something about "HE did this, so I did that" and it goes SOUTH from there. When they get back in class, Billy trips Joey. After lunch, Joey breaks Billy's pencil on purpose. When nobody's looking, Billy writes on Joey's desk, and later, Joey steals Billy's folder. Sooner or later, Billy and his FRIENDS FACE Joey and HIS friends, and they call each other names. Somebody gets HURT. Somebody else gets hurt WORSE. And there is no telling when or IF these conflicts will EVER end.

Sound familiar? We've all EXPERIENCED this KIND of ESCALATING PETTINESS, and we readily ADMIT that it's SILLY. But what if we remove the names "Billy" and "Joey" and insert the words "husband" and "wife"? The story doesn't change that much. Or we could insert the names of two rival high schools, or two rival companies, or "The Hatfields" and "The McCoys," or Republicans and Democrats, or "pro-life" and "pro-choice," or Israel and Palestine. Conflict at ANY level is STILL conflict at the most BASIC level. And if not PREVENTABLE, most conflict is at least RESOLVABLE... but not until ONE side DECIDES NOT TO RETALIATE.

"An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth." We know THAT law all too well. It's given THREE times in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:21), the "law of retaliation." And just like so many laws in the Old Testament, it was actually GIVEN in LOVE, to PROTECT people.

Think about it, when somebody hurts you, what is your natural impulse? It's to hurt them BACK. Someone insults you, and the first thought is to insult them BACK. But let's be honest. We don't JUST want to get EVEN. If he hit me ONCE, I want to hit him back HARDER or TWICE. We want to do WORSE to them than they did to US. So an "eye for an eye" was MEANT to LIMIT the amount of retaliation we can seek. If someone broke your finger, you can't CHOP off his HAND – or his HEAD. An eye for eye, but NO FURTHER than that.

So the law of retaliation was MEANT for GOOD, to LIMIT revenge, but we have USED it as a JUSTIFICATION for revenge. We become the SAME kind of bully who CAUSED the injury. We SINK to THEIR level.

Someone wise once said: "Choose your enemies carefully, for you will BECOME LIKE them." 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. When we SHOOT back at those shooting at us, we become LIKE them. And then we become WORSE than them by escalating it – and JUSTIFY our actions by BLAMING THEM for OUR actions. THEY STARTED it.

The fallacy of this whole system was pointed out by Mahatma Gandhi, who said: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." At some point, someone has to STOP getting EVEN and STOP poking eyes out.

A true story:

A pastor had taken a group of high schoolers on a winter retreat to a mountain cabin. The boys were sleeping downstairs and the girls were upstairs, on the main floor.

Sometime in the middle of the night, some of the girls came downstairs with hands full of snow, which HAPPENED to fall on some of the guys' faces. The girls then quickly ran back upstairs.

You can probably guess what the GUYS wanted to do. They wanted to get EVEN.

They were all set to RETURN SNOW FOR SNOW, but after a little conversation with the adult guides, they decided on ANOTHER plan – they would do NOTHING and SAY nothing about it to the

girls the next morning. They would act as though NOTHING had happened. Then, they all went back to sleep.

Sometime the next afternoon, the girls finally ASKED the boys if they'd had visitors the night before.

"Why do you ask?" the boys wondered. "Did you do something."

You see, the girls had spent most of the night AWAKE, WAITING for the boys to get EVEN; but nothing happened. Then they expected the boys to get after them in the morning, and they didn't SAY ANYTHING. The girls had a MISERABLE night, while the boys SLEPT SOUNDLY.

The adults were wise. If the boys had acted like the girls, EVERYONE would have ended up with a cabin full of snow, and a night of no sleep. Most likely, the adults would have had to END all the GETTING EVEN SOME time during the night anyway – so why not right at the BEGINNING?

And while the boys didn't get REVENGE – they didn't become LIKE the girls and sink to THEIR level – they DID get EVEN, but in a DIFFERENT WAY.

St. Paul talked about this kind of non-response in Romans (12:17-21). He said:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will HEAP BURNING COALS on their heads." do not BE overcome by evil, but OVERCOME evil with GOOD.

"Heaping burning coals on their heads" means SHOWING the offender their sin, by CONTRASTING it with YOUR GOOD. It means CONVICTING them of their OWN sinfulness, perhaps without EVER SAYING a WORD.

But it's not ONLY another way to get even. Jesus says, "LOVE your enemies." It doesn't SEEM like he was thinking PUNISHMENT. He has something GREATER in mind. All through this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus has been calling us to a GREATER RIGHTEOUSNESS, the law of LOVE.

But as I said a couple weeks ago, CHRISTIAN love isn't love as WE think of it. It isn't a FEELING. Jesus isn't telling us to LIKE our enemies; he's NOT telling us to have warm and fuzzy FEELINGS about them; he's calling us to ACTION, to DO something.

Another true story.

In 1991, Rabbi Michael Weisser was living in Lincoln, Neb., with his wife and children. He was then the cantor and spiritual leader of the South Street Temple, the oldest Jewish congregation in Lincoln.

One Sunday morning, a few days after they had moved into their new house, the phone rang. The man on the other end of the line called Rabbi Weisser "Jew boy" and told him he would be sorry he had moved in. Two days later, a thick package of anti-Semitic pamphlets arrived in the mail, including an unsigned card that read, "The KKK is watching you, scum."

The messages, it turned out, were from a man named Larry Trapp, the Grand Dragon of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, who kept loaded weapons, pro-Hitler material and his Klan robe in his cramped Lincoln apartment. Then 42, Mr. Trapp was nearly blind and used a wheelchair to get around; both of his legs had been amputated because of diabetes.

In a later interview, Mr. Trapp said he had wanted to scare Rabbi Weisser into moving out of Lincoln. "As the state leader," he said. "I spent a lot of money and went out of my way to instill fear."

Rabbi Weisser, who suspected the person threatening him WAS Mr. Trapp, got his telephone number and started leaving messages on the answering machine. He'd say things like: "Larry, there's

a lot of love out there. You're not getting any of it. Don't you want some?" And he did that once a week.

One day, Mr. Trapp ANSWERED the phone. The rabbi's wife had told him to say something NICE if he ever got Mr. Trapp on the line, and he followed her advice. He said, "I heard you're disabled. I thought you might need a ride to the grocery store."

Then, one night, the Rabbi's phone rang again. It was Mr. Trapp. He said, "I want to get out of what I'm doing, and I don't know how."

Rabbi Weisser and his wife drove to Mr. Trapp's apartment that night. They talked for hours, and a close friendship formed. The couple's home became a kind of hospice for Mr. Trapp, who moved into one of their bedrooms as his health worsened, and the Rabbi's wife became Mr. Trapp's caretaker and confidante.

Mr. Trapp eventually RENOUNCED the Klan, apologized to those he had threatened, and converted to Judaism in Rabbi Weisser's synagogue.

Love changes people. As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only LIGHT can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only LOVE can do that."

Love like this comes from SEEING people differently. There's too much DEMONIZING of opponents in this world. We call them SCUM, something LESS than human, so that it's all RIGHT to HATE them. That is NOT Jesus' way.

HE sees ALL people as children of God, INFINITELY LOVED BY God, REGARDLESS of who they are or what they've done. And he tells US to do the same, to see people like HE sees them, not as a friend or an enemy, but as brothers and sisters.

Now, brothers and sisters – sometimes in families, we DISAGREE with each other, and there may have been times when we have HURT each other, sometimes even INTENTIONALLY, but we never FORGET that we ARE BROTHERS or SISTERS.

So as CHRISTIANS, we should always be CONSCIOUS of the fact that EVERY person has been created by GOD. ALL of us are children of the SAME heavenly Father.

As Desmond Tutu put it: "When we see others as the enemy, we risk BECOMING what we HATE. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing OURSELVES. All of humanity is DEPENDENT on RECOGNIZING the humanity in OTHERS."

Jesus says, "love your enemies," not because THEY deserve it, but because YOU are BETTER than hate. Because recognizing the child of God in ANOTHER, HONORS the child of God in YOU. And your OWN HUMANITY DEPENDS on that. Amen.