

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany C 20 February 2022

Luke 6:27-38

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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To you who are called, who are beloved in God the Father, kept safe for Jesus Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit: May grace, mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance. Amen.

*"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies . . ."* Let's pray...

Complete these sentences: Revenge is \_\_\_\_\_. Don't get mad, \_\_\_\_\_. Is there anything sweeter than getting even with someone? It feels so good to cut that social media bully down to size; to lean on the horn and shake your head at the reckless driver who just cut you off; or one of my favourites – to throw cane toads into the neighbour's swimming pool in protest against, well, anything you don't like about them. Or maybe it's the kind of revenge that lives on after we're gone: writing someone out of your will for the way they've treated you while you were alive – it doesn't get any sweeter than that, does it? Vengeance is so common that people think it's a constitutional right. Someone disrespects you; you disrespect them back – that's only fair, isn't it? What does Jesus think? Jesus urges us to get even in a way no human mind is wired to think of. He encourages us to get even with . . . Love.

Jesus knows that the world's way of dealing with things is still: 'fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered' (Leviticus 24:20). But Jesus says, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again" (Luke 6:27-30).

Surely, Jesus can't be serious. Doesn't this just give unbelievers unbridled justification to do whatever they want to Christians with no come-back? No! He's not saying that we can't speak up in self-defence. Jesus did when on trial before Annas. One of the temple officials struck Jesus and he didn't strike back. Jesus' only response was, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" (John 18:23)? Neither is Jesus saying that we can't defend ourselves or our loved ones from harm. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> commandments permit us to. Parents, teachers, police officers, soldiers, and judges are permitted to exact punishment as God's representatives. What Jesus is saying is that personal vengeance is sinful. He tells us to "Love our enemies." To which, I raise my first protest. This kind of love is impossible for us! isn't it? Well, yes . . . unless it's been given to us first.

St Paul quite clearly states that we have; most notably in Romans and Ephesians – 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:6-8) and; 'You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world . . . But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—' (Ephesians 2:1-5).

So, God got even with us. How? He sent his Son to save us. And he did it by allowing humanity to do its very worst to his Son – curse him, punch him, slap him, spit in his face, flog him, mock him, strip him naked, parade him through the streets of Jerusalem, nail him to a tree, and sit back in smug satisfaction and watch him die. And Jesus' response? "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

If you ever wonder how God should treat us – look at the cross. That's what we deserve. If you ever wonder how God has treated us – look at the cross. See Jesus hanging there in our place; suffering for our lovelessness; dying for the times we took vengeance into our own hands. That's how God got even with us.

Do you ever wonder why it's so hard; maybe ridiculous even, for us to love our enemies? Any thoughts? . . . because, we look in the wrong direction. Instead of looking up † at what God has done for us, we look down and judge whether someone deserves our love or not. The fact that God loves us, though we don't deserve it, is the only reason we can offer love when hated, blessings when cursed, prayers for mistreatment, our cheeks to violence, and charity to thieves. So, when you question why you should love your enemies; it's because God loves you.

If you want to get even, like Jesus, you've got to push back against society's expectations, you've got to be different, you've got to love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. And here, I lodge my second protest [in three parts]:

- What if the love I show an enemy just makes them hate me more? Big whoop. [1 John 3:1] says, 'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.' We are set apart as children of the Most High God who is kind and merciful even to the ungrateful and wicked.
- Okay, but what if we give generously to those who can't or won't repay us, don't we risk losing the roof over our heads and the clothes off our backs? To which Jesus replies, "'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these'" (Matthew 6:25-33). Hasn't God promised to give us everything we need for life (Matthew 6:11)?
- What about justice and fairness? If I don't retaliate the world will walk all over me. St Paul says: '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"' (Deuteronomy 32:35/Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30).

If you really want to get even with an enemy, really cut them to the heart, really break them – show them kindness when they don't deserve it. Treat them the way God has treated you. Who knows? Maybe your kindness will lead that person to repent of their sins and seek God's forgiveness (Matthew 5:16). Then you'll truly be even: you'll be reconciled to each other and to God by the precious blood of Jesus.

Jesus concludes this lesson with: “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” (Luke 6:37-38). When Jesus says, “running over” he literally means “pouring out superabundantly”; uncontrollably, if you like.

God, our loving God, ‘is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome’ (Deuteronomy 10:17). His capacity for love and forgiveness is profuse, over the top, pours out and overflows beyond our wildest imagining. The way I entertain my weird little brain is to liken God's bounty to one of those chocolate fountains (use whatever your preferred delicacy might be) hooked up to an inexhaustible supply of delicious, sweet chocolate, with an unlimited usage plan that costs me nothing (Psalm 23:5 “my cup overflows”).

Remember, saints, you can't ever lose the reward Jesus has won and reserved for you in heaven. Let God worry about taking care of you now. God's love for you is unconditional, and that frees you to love your enemies, turn the other cheek, be generous with what he has given you because you know that your true treasure, wealth, and reward [salvation] is safe in heaven – purchased, won, and guaranteed for you by Jesus Christ himself. Amen.

And the love of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts, your minds, and your treasure in heaven, in Christ Jesus. Amen.