

CHARACTER MEANS CHOOSING *No Enemies Here*

Luke 6:27-36

October 20, 2024

I want to begin this morning's sermon with appreciation and warning.

First, appreciation. I believe your presence in this space and your participation in this service say something significant about you. You have chosen—and it was a choice—to spend some time in worship and reflection. To, for even this one hour, set aside your agenda. To open your heart, and to listen for a word of present truth found in ancient scripture. Further, you have chosen to do this in a community of faith. This community of faith. You didn't have to do that. Actually, it makes you rather strange. So, I want you to know that I do not take it for granted that busy people would set time aside. I do not take it for granted that anyone would listen at all in this talk-first culture. And I do not take lightly the gift and challenge of sharing my words on these words with my congregation. I am grateful for this place, and I am grateful for you.

Now, the warning. The choice you have made puts you in a potentially precarious position. For those of us, which admittedly is most of us, who spend our time in like-minded bubbles or echo chambers of endless affirmation, worship is a different experience altogether. What we find here is not always unconditional support for all of our previously held convictions. Here we are attentive to the jarring message that we must change. After our early service in the chapel, one of our faithful worshipers came to me and gave this feedback: "Thank you for that sermon. We deserve it." So, buckle up.

To begin with the obvious, our era is defined by extreme polarization and negative partisanship. Simply put, this means that we are increasingly driven not by positive feelings toward the party, candidate, or position we support but rather by negative feelings toward those

we oppose. We are more influenced by our fear and disgust than hope and affection. You don't need external examples to prove this point. You experience it in your own lives, in our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods, even in our own families, where differences of perspective have taken on an existential tone and debate has devolved into a barrage of bitterly personal attacks. Where relationships are ended over political disagreement. In fact, in surveys, fully half of Americans report few or no friends of the opposing view. Is it then any wonder that our language has devolved? You hear it. *Depraved. Dangerous. Demonic. Evil. Enemy.*

In such a context, there is a fragility to every communal bond and a suspicion of any divergence. The drive toward perceived purity or self-defined justice makes it not just permissible but now mandatory to cut others off when they fail the test. You know what I mean. *I cannot spend time with... I cannot sit in the pews with anyone who votes that way, who supports that policy, who follows that leader.*

Now listen. Purity and justice are important values. They are biblical values. They are Christian values. My unease is rooted in how rarely those values are tempered by the virtue of love. In our era, the words of Jesus this morning seem laughably naïve or dangerously misguided. And I have heard both reactions. What Jesus demands is difficult in the best of times, and no reasonable soul would suggest we're living through those. Love of enemies now feels like surrender to the very people who must be crushed.

And this is why we need the commandment. Jesus holds in contrast our logic and the mercy of God, and we must make a choice.

The calculation of the culture, which we typically take for granted, is unambiguous. It is crystal clear. We do good to those who do good to us. We love those who love us. Such a strategy serves our self-interest. It also intensifies the tribalism in which polarization flourishes. It creates sharp boundaries between *us* (and those we love) and *them* (the ones we label enemy). It is neat. It is clean. It is zero sum.

And here's the hard part. Jesus explicitly rejects this logic. He will not have it. He demands a different standard. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.

Okay, Jesus. I have two questions right off the bat. Why? And how?

Why should we love our enemies? Get this: *not* because their actions merit our love. *They hate us. It is only fair to respond in kind, and so we do, and so we have.*

And yes, we live in the wreckage of this reciprocity, learning that the ratchet only turns in one direction. Hateful rhetoric builds permission structures for violent action. I promise you, this will not end well. Jesus gives a direct if unsatisfying answer to the question of why we should love those who hate us. Do not blame me—I'm just the messenger. Jesus said it. Here it is. We should love our enemies because *God loves them*. That's it. That's all we've got, that love for the undeserving is the nature of God. It is not fair; it is merciful. And Jesus trusts that when we receive this mercy, when we know that we are loved despite ourselves, we can extend the same grace to others. Even those who, like us, do not deserve it. Jesus knows that only love gives us the power to resist our instincts and reject the self-justifying logic of hatred. Be merciful. Why? Because God is merciful.

In the hope that you're still listening, there is a second question. *How do we love our enemies? How? How do we do this?* The answers here are even less clear. We're here this morning because we want to follow the teachings of Jesus. We have good and faithful intentions. We want to follow as he directs. But then, we read some outrageous post from someone on the opposite political

pole. Or we drive past the neighbor whose yard signs make our blood boil. Or we find ourselves in a heated debate with a colleague, a family member, a fellow congregant. And it becomes so easy to justify our base response. So easy to excoriate our enemies. And, be honest, it feels good. At least for a moment.

So, *how* do we resist the temptation to turn up the heat? I will venture two strategies.

First, start with those closest to you. It struck me this week that so much of our emotional energy is expended on people who have no idea we exist. Imagine if those same resources were redirected toward the people we know, the people who know us. After all, what we have in common is that we all desire relationship. We all want to be valued. We want to be heard. And when we take the time to hear and tell stories, we discover the beauty and complexity that lies below the surface and beyond the label. We've got to get closer. Two Wednesdays ago, I stood at the edge of a cornfield in eastern Pennsylvania and for over an hour listened to a Mennonite farmer describe the joys and challenges of his vocation in this time. In many ways, our lives are so different. And yet what struck me that night was how his story made sense to me, and how much better I understood it when I heard in his own voice. Friends at Second, this is not rocket science. Neither is it easy. But we must disconnect from systems only designed to drive division, create outrage, promote lies, demonize the vulnerable among us. We've got to get closer. We must find the time necessary to build relationships strong enough to hold when the disagreements come. And I think I know where we can find that time. Turn off the rage machine. And if you figure out how, please tell me.

Second strategy: make a commitment to community that shapes your character and stretches you. It is, I think, no coincidence that an exponential growth in hostility is paralleled by an unraveling of institutions that promote the common good. Love is not some wispy emotion, nor is it a one-time action. Love is a choice we make repeatedly, daily, sometimes hourly. This kind of love requires the support and accountability of fellow

travelers. I thought about that this week when I read the words of a friend whose community is rebuilding after the devastation of recent hurricanes. My friend observed that "we Americans are really good at acute compassion, but pretty bad at chronic empathy."

She's right about that. We love the stories of these incredible heroic deeds of rescue and recovery. They inspire us. They move us. And they should. But then the reporters go home, the gravity of the need settles in, and the long work of rebuilding begins. It is then that mission-driven institutions and committed neighbors keep showing up. The churches that were part of the community long before the storm will be the very ones still there to pick up the pieces when others leave, taking only their pictures to post on social media. The choice for love, the work of mercy, is like that. Not acute compassion, but chronic empathy. Not the singular heroic deed, but the commitment to keep showing up. To keep trying. To keep listening.

Yes, we must oppose any politics that traffic in disinformation, division, and demonization. The Gospel demands that we stand against cruelty and vengeance. And, *how* we do that matters.

So, yes, what you've chosen to do is quite extraordinary, and I'm grateful. You are not here to sharpen your attack against an enemy. In this space, we will not point our fingers, and we will not raise our fists. Not here. We are here to be shaped by the mercy of God, to be guided by the call of love, to listen for a better way from hostility to hope. And we will keep doing it. Newsflash! We'll be here next month too, and next year, and for as long as we have a voice and a vision. I urge you to join this movement.

Ultimately, we cannot control the actions of others, and so, we must be attentive to who *we* are becoming, for our choices determine our character. We who follow Jesus cannot be held captive to the cycle of retribution. We who follow Jesus cannot set out on some foolish crusade for Christian dominance. The way we love our enemy best is by refusing to call them the word.

Only love can conquer hatred.
Only peace can vanquish violence.
Only light can drive out darkness.

Friends, this is no time to give in or give up. This is the time to choose love. For God's sake, choose love. Amen.