

“A survival guide for love”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 6:27-38

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We're all familiar with the Bible verses that pray to God for the destruction of one's enemies. They're a right old feast of vengeance and justice. Of course, Jesus—the party pooper that he was—put a stop to all that, telling us to pray for our enemies, to love and forgive them. This was bad news for anyone in need of retribution. But with God out of the business, others have been happy to fill the vacuum. For instance, right now there's a phone number you can call that's just like any prayer hotline, except instead of praying to God, you leave a voicemail, and the Satanic Missionary Society of Olympia, Washington, prays to—yes, that's right—Satan for you. They'll take any prayers you can't take to God.

I heard about this hotline on an episode of *This American Life*.

One caller says, “Hello. I would like all of my enemies to suffer. Thank you.” And that's how most of these calls go.

Another caller says, “Hello, Satanists everywhere. I'm calling to put a hex on the 1230 Club in Olympia, Washington, because they're just jerks. Because they start blasting the music really early every night. New Year's Eve tonight, and they're already, like starting at 6 in the evening. Please make the 1230 Club go out of business, but make sure everybody that works there goes deaf, like, from playing their music so loud first. Hail Satan.”

But do you know who apparently is in the greatest need of wrath against their enemies? Teenage girls. They call A LOT. One calls to ask for a hex on a tattletale named Matt. The message ends with a cheerful “Thank you! Hail Satan.”

Last week, we talked about how being a faithful disciple of Christ inevitably creates enemies. Today, we ask: So what are we to do with these enemies? The world, and every instinct in us, and apparently satanic prayer hotlines, would tell us to oppose them, curse them, hate them.

Jesus, however, says to love our enemies. To bless them, pray for them, and return no evil.

What? That's crazy! I have a pastor friend who says that congregations tend to respond to this text in the same way his children respond to seeing cooked spinach on their dinner plate (Vince Crowe-Tipton). For some of us, it's downright offensive; we've seen how this text has been used to keep people in situations of violence and oppression. For others of us, it's a nice ideal, perhaps plausible for the rare saint, but it's unrealistic for those of who have to live in the real world. It sounds like a sure way to get hurt over and over again.

I mean, think about it. We're not just talking about refraining from anger at the barista who gets your coffee wrong, or the jerk who cuts you off on the highway. We're talking about loving the members of ISIS. We're talking about loving the person who shoots up a school or a church. And if we lived back in Jesus' day, we'd be talking about loving the Roman soldier who killed your brother and desecrated your temple, whose empire has reduced you to poverty.

Truth is, when push comes to shove, we don't believe in loving our enemies.

The problem is: Jesus did believe it. He believed it so much that even on the cross he prayed to God, "Father, forgive them."

For Jesus, loving your enemy wasn't a suggestion; it was a command. A hard one, to be sure. We see even him struggle with it, get mad, shout at his enemies. In fact, there's no way we could do this alone. It's why he came to us. To lend the power of his love to our own. But Jesus also knew that we can't have it both ways; we can't love sometimes, and be indifferent or hate at other times. We don't get to pick and choose whom we love.

Love is like breathing. If you stop for more than a couple minutes, you stop altogether. It was love that God breathed into us at the beginning of creation. Love that fashioned us in the image of God. Stop loving, and what made you precious, what made you "you," will be gone. We've seen this over and over again—how good people become the very monsters they beheld, how over time the lack of love saps a person of their joy and purpose, makes them bitter and mean and unhappy.

A few weeks ago, I talked about how I was bullied in school. I said that the worst part wasn't what they did or said to me; it was what they made me believe about myself. That wasn't the whole truth. The truth is that the worst part was that they made me become like them: a bully. I took out my hurt on anything weaker than me, saying some really mean things to my sister. And then, years later, beneath the guise of justice, I set out to bully the bullies, to tear down anyone I deemed oppressive. Not because I wanted to save them, but because I wanted to hurt them. And through it all, the gentle child who liked to bring flowers to his mom got lost. He suffocated.

The good news is that Jesus Christ never stopped loving that child, and through that love, Jesus brought him back to life. He resuscitated him, just as Jesus will resuscitate you, bring you back to life, give you another chance—and he'll do it over and over again. He'll do it right now. But at some point, *you've* got to start breathing.

Because what you've got to understand is that loving your enemy isn't an optional, extreme kind of love. It's the only kind of love.

We know this because it was Jesus—the only one who believed in this unrealistic, crazy love—who conquered death and rose to life. He's the only one to have survived. For all their realism, not another one was able to save their life by hating their enemy. Christ is the only one who never lost himself, and as such, he has left us a map that leads to a resurrected life. It's a survival guide for love. And we just read a part of it today.

Step one of this guide: just do it. Enact love. We tend to think of love as an emotion. To love someone is to feel good toward them, to want to spend time with them, to like them. But Jesus doesn't describe love in this way. He never says you have to like them. He describes love as a series of actions: praying, forgiving, blessing, lending, turning the other cheek. The Greek word for love here isn't romantic desire or friendship; it's not even family. It's *agape*, which is a selfless, unconditional action for the benefit of the other.

Step two is going the extra mile. *Agape* is more than refusing to hit back. Passive indifference doesn't cut it here. *Agape* is bold; it seeks out the other.

Jesus gives three examples: (1) Do good. This means to feed your enemy, to visit them in the hospital, to defend their liberties. (2) Bless. This means to speak well of them, to take the time to see them, I mean really see them, as a human being with the light of God in them. To listen to what they have to say, and to value what they say. (3) Pray for. This means to lift them up to God, to actively seek their wellbeing. It means to forgive.

Step three is to reclaim humanity. It's understanding that unconditional love never means the acceptance of evil. To love someone isn't to justify or ignore wrongdoing. It's being honest and holding them accountable, because you believe that they can do better—more than that, you believe that they *are* better. To turn the other cheek isn't to passively accept abuse; it's to force them to use the palm of their right hand or the back of their left hand, both of which were unacceptable in ancient society. To turn the other cheek is to force your attacker to see your humanity and witness the loss of their own.

Allan Boesak, a pastor who fought apartheid in South Africa, says, “When you love your enemy, your first thought is not to eliminate that person but to remind him of his own humanness. So, for Christians, loving your enemy is about saying to someone: ‘You are more than you have allowed yourself to be... You must see the damage you have done, but do not let that damage be the prison you lock yourself into, because I will not lock you in that prison.’ ”

Step four: be you. Be the wondrous, beautiful you God made you to be. You know who you are, and their hate can't touch you. You become like Marvel's Luke Cage, bulletproof. Bullets of hate bounce off you. Because this is how you survive. This is how your soul makes it another day. This is how you endure, and confront, the hostility of the world without going crazy. You don't give them power over you. You don't react. You act.

And lastly, step five: trust. Don't believe *you* can do it. Believe God can. When you accept how loved you are and you dare to share it, you love with the whole power of God's love. You love with a love that birthed the world, defeated death, and saved us all. This love is all around you. All you have to do is breathe. **Amen.**