

Love your Enemies for Contempt Cannot Be

Luke 6:27-38 Epiphany 7 Year C

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May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen.

Good Morning!

Sometimes I wonder how it is that anyone ever decides to follow Jesus. Much of what he teaches is neither pragmatic nor is it palatable, instead some of it is just absurdly hard.

"Give all you have to the poor and come follow me," (Matthew 19:21).

"Whoever would be great among you, must be your servant..." (Mark 10:43).

"The one among you who is without sin, may throw the first stone..." (John 8:7).

"Whoever wants to save their life, must lose it..." (Matthew 16:25).

Anyone given away all of our money to the poor?

I haven't.

Jesus says, looking at the 12 who have said "Yes" to his invitation to follow him, the 12 who have left their livelihood, their families, and walked on down the road after him, they hear him say,

"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..." (Luke 6:27-29a).

I wonder how to do this now, in February of 2025. In previous times of my life and in the world's coming and going this admonishment has felt somewhat removed, somewhat metaphorical, or kind of like a rule of thumb I would want to remember as I found myself at odds with a person who had a difference of opinion from mine.

Now, and I feel like I'm probably not the only one, I feel a divisiveness in our country, in our communities, perhaps even in our congregations, that seems to include wide swaths of people. I wonder how to live out this injunction in the midst of my distaste, my dislike and perhaps more accurately described the contempt I find myself experiencing as

I read of prominent members of our government rewriting history and claiming that Ukraine started the war with Russia.

Or when I hear of USDA employees who were working to combat the avian flu, thoughtlessly fired and then two weeks later I read of the clumsy attempts that are being made to rehire these essential workers all the while the flu flies on.

The thoughts I have as I see the order to cap National Institute of Health research grants at 15% reimbursement; a change that will cause Michigan's top three medical

research universities, University of Michigan, Michigan State and Wayne State, if it's enforced, this cap will cause these research facilities to lose \$200 million dollars a year, (*Detroit Free Press*, Kristen J. Shamus, February 17, 2025). I think about all of the medical advancements that will not happen, the people who will die, because of these decisions.

Then I hear, Jesus' words, "*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you are not condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven,*" (Luke 6:37).

I am repulsed by the notion of offering love and compassion and mercy to the people who have conceived and carried out these actions. And this feeling puts me squarely at odds with the words of Jesus Christ.

Conservative social commentator, Arthur C. Brooks has an interesting take on this predicament that he writes about in his book, *Love your Enemies: How Decent People can Save America from the Culture of Contempt.*

Brooks points out the obvious that when we treat someone with contempt that person will never forgive you. He says that contempt as opposed to anger is a cold emotion. Contempt is when we hold a belief of the utter worthlessness of another human being. He also says that this can be an addictive emotion, an addictive behavior. A behavior that may be behind the undoing of American civil society.

Brooks cites the work of marriage counsellor John Gottman, who after an hour interviewing a couple is able to predict with a 94% success rate as to whether or not a couple will still be together in three years. Part of what Gottman looks for in the couples is whether or not they speak to each other with contempt. Gottman says if you can induce married people who are at odds with each other to stop the cycle of contemptuously criticizing then it is possible for the couple to reclaim the connection they may have had in the early stages of their relationship. So, with couples who want to work on saving their marriages, Gottman gets them to say five nice things before they are able to offer one criticism.

Part of the issue with speaking with contempt is that it is a cycle that fuels itself, both externally and internally. I critique-you critique, is the obvious external fuel. But he also points out that the cycle is fueled internally. That is when we offer contemptuous critiques of another, our responses, our reactions bypass our prefrontal cortex, that processes our conscious emotions and conscious reactions. And instead the contemptuous responses and reactions come from the middle of our brain, a walnut size portion of that primitive "Lizard" part of our brain known as the *nucleus accumbens* that concerns itself with motivation, pleasure and positive reinforcement, reinforcement learning and the Pavlovian instrumental transfer. All of which is to say, this is the part of the brain that plays a role in addictive behaviors. As best as I can tell if we say something contemptuous, that part of our brain gets a positive jolt and it then begins to hardwire us to do it again, because pleasure gets stimulated.

But if we can break the cycle, between responding without thinking and instead wait, process and then offer a response that includes a positive affirmation of the individual then our brain slowly gets rewired into different behaviors, and we create different ways of interacting with one another.

Brook believes that we can take these interactions beyond marriage to the world of citizenship. He says, the point is not to stop disagreeing with people, but to stop transmitting our belief or holding our belief that the person we disagree with is unworthy of care. "Love your enemies." Jesus didn't tell us to agree with them, rather we are to love them. Loving them means staying in relationship with them, dismissing and devaluing, dehumanizing them will only increase the cycle of dissonance, despair and contempt.

Friends, we cannot contemptuously dismiss, deny or dehumanize. We cannot be those people, we are the ~~Other~~ Christians.

We can love our enemies and not acquiesce. We can turn the other cheek and not be passive. We can follow Christ's teachings of love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, but remember that love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness extends to all, otherwise we are not following Jesus. And no one ever said following Jesus is easy. Amen.