

**Sermon:** But I tell you ...

("The surprising work of God.")

Years ago, when I was 25, I was preparing to go to Labrador for a two-year MCC Teaching assignment. Between the time I started the process of applying and my leaving date, my father became ill with kidney disease. During the week before my departure, he was hospitalized. He was too sick to come out of the hospital for my sister's wedding the day before I was to leave. I was torn. What should I do? My mother encouraged me to keep my commitment, and when I asked my brother, he told me of a vision he had had while praying, that my Dad would become much more ill before he recovered. I decided to cling to this vision as I left for orientation and then my assignment. To make a longer story short, this is exactly what happened.

This pre-Lenten series is about the surprising work of God. It is true in our lives and in the Biblical accounts we read. It seems that every time I read a passage, something pops out that I don't remember seeing before or understanding as I now do. The Bible truly is old yet always new.

Today's Gospel reading is one of those passages that keep opening up new ways of thinking about God's kingdom. It is part of a longer teaching Jesus gave a large crowd of his disciples and a great number of other people who had come to hear him and be healed of their diseases.

In the earlier part in chapter 6, beginning at verse 12, we are told that one day Jesus had gone to a mountainside to pray. He had spent the whole night there praying. In the morning, he called together his disciples, those who had been following him and chose 12 to be his special students, the ones we usually refer to as the 12 disciples.

Together with these twelve and other followers, Jesus went further down the mountain to a level place, where an even larger crowd of followers had gathered. They wanted to hear him. They wanted to touch him. They wanted to be healed of their diseases.

Imagine these crowds. They had grown up in the strict teachings of all the laws found in the Hebrew scripture. So many "don'ts" and "shall nots", the Ten Commandments where eight of the ten basically begin with "you shall not", and all the other laws related to what you could or could not do on the Sabbath, etc. It felt burdensome, and it was. But here was a teacher with a message of hope for those struggling in their life situation, and harsh words for the privileged.

As Jesus was jostled by those trying to get close to him, he looked at his disciples and gave a message that flipped the social order of the day. "Blessed", he said, "are you who are poor, you who hunger now, you who weep now, who are hated, excluded, insulted and rejected because of the Son of Man. Your reward is great in heaven."

Then Jesus spoke hard words for those who thought they had an inside track, a series of woes to the rich, the well fed, the happy-go-lucky.

We can imagine this crowd saying, Amen, Jesus, Amen. You understand our situation. Keep talking. And Jesus does. If the earlier message was surprising, what comes next is even more surprising. This message is for everyone.

He begins with:

1. 6:27 Love your enemies. The word 'enemies' seems like such a strong word. The description of enemies here is all about what others do to you. They hate you, curse you, abuse you, strike you, steal from you.

The people of Israel knew how to respond to someone who was an enemy, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, even the score. These were the teachings they had grown up with.

Jesus' teaching called for something better. Do good to those who hate you, (6:28) bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (6:29) 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. (6:30) Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

Commentator Ronald Allen says that Jesus' kingdom teaching "calls for attitudes and actions that seek the good of the other, and, hence, that build up the community. Luke's form of nonviolence in this passage thus goes beyond non-retaliation. The disciples are to take positive steps that promote the welfare of the parties with whom the community is in conflict."

This doesn't exactly follow human nature. We have to be intentional about it. I remember hearing about a person in Saskatoon who went into a shop for a machine part early in the pandemic. He was wearing a mask as everyone was being asked to do. The owner angrily confronted the customer for wearing a mask. The customer, taken aback, replied that he did not mean to offend but wanted to do his part to keep others safe. He was served and left, shaken by the encounter.

This lengthy pandemic has exposed feelings we may not have had for a long time. We have discovered friends and family members who have very different opinions from our own. Some have reported setting ground rules regarding contentious issues so that good conversations can still happen. In other cases, relationships have been strained and some people who used to enjoy one another's company no longer see each other.

We each have to ask ourselves, how healthy are our relationships? Have we allowed some people to become our personal enemies? What do Jesus' words, "Love one another" mean for us when we can't agree, when we feel annoyed by strongly held opposing views? How do we do good to those with whom we differ? How do we bless them? Do we remember Jesus' admonition to pray for them? Can we offer the other cheek or the other ear and listen without arguing or trying to change their mind?

This winter I read an article by a chaplain who had been asked to see an uncooperative patient in a hospital. Among other things, this patient refused to wear a mask. The chaplain chose not to address that issue but took time to learn about what was important for this person. She learned they had some common interests. After a meaningful visit, she prepared to leave, saying she wouldn't be able to come close enough to shake the person's hand because of pandemic protocol, but thanked the patient for the time together. As she was walking away, she heard the patient asking a nurse whether she might have a mask.

She was stunned. With her soft approach she had been able to show love to someone who had become an “enemy”, so to speak, to those trying to help her.

When we look at Jesus’ encounters with the religious establishment who were often trying to undermine him, we don’t find him arguing with them. Instead, he often turned the question around and they were left floundering. We have much to learn from his responses.

Later in the passage Jesus comes back to this idea of loving your enemies. “Do good and lend”, he says, “expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

The second key point in this passage is this:

2. 6:31 “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. Then he expands that idea with three examples: “If you love those who love you; if you do good to those who do good to you; if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive; what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”

I don’t know about you, but I have to admit I find it a lot easier to respond in positive ways to people I’ve had a positive experience within the past. The surprise twist to Jesus’ words is, “What credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” Ouch, this stings. What if I don’t even know the person?

My husband remembers an experience he had when we lived in Toronto. We had signed up for an “Urban Plunge” experience to get a feel for what it might be like living on the street. If I remember correctly, we took little or no money, only a token for a return trip. We were divided up into groups of two and encouraged to panhandle as part of the experience.

It was a bitterly cold February evening when we all headed downtown for the next 6 or so hours. Getting off the subway at Yonge and Bloor, we headed off in different directions to find out what was going on on the street and where we might warm up when we got cold.

Ken will never forget standing shivering on the opposite corner of Yonge St. from his friend and trying to panhandle for some spare change. He remembers what it felt like when people walked by, probably on their way to a hockey game, avoiding eye contact. He also remembers two young women who smiled at him as they walked by, and his shock and gratitude when they returned with two pieces of pizza.

Sometimes we have to stand in the shoes of the less fortunate to more fully understand what Jesus was saying.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

The third point Jesus makes is:

3. 6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. My dictionary defines mercy this way: more kindness than justice requires; kindness beyond what can be claimed or expected. In other words, we are to be more than fair. Allen says, Mercy is releasing people and circumstances from recrimination they deserve.

Jesus proceeds to explain by giving two negative and two positive directives. The negatives: (6:37) “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. I think

we understand what Jesus was talking about here. He wasn't talking about having good judgement, but rather about attitudes toward others, about those times when we feel others don't measure up to the standard that we have set.

The notion of mercy is being tested these days as we see behaviours and attitudes around the country and around the world that startle us. I don't know the answer to solving the problems but if I claim to be a disciple of Jesus, I do have to wrestle with this passage and how it challenges my attitudes.

Jesus concludes this teaching with two positive directives. The first, forgive, and you will be forgiven. Commentator Ronald Allen says: To be unforgiven and unforgiving is to be imprisoned by the lack of forgiveness. Jesus demonstrated that it is possible to forgive, which releases both those who forgive and those who are forgiven (Luke 6:37b).

The OT story of Joseph facing his brothers in Egypt gives us a good example both of the struggle to forgive and the restoration possible after forgiveness is offered. In Genesis 45 we read the story of Joseph revealing his true identity to his brothers. They are shocked and afraid that now they will receive the punishment they deserve. But Joseph sees a bigger picture, one in which he had a key role in saving his own people. In Genesis 45:15 we read that he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. What a moment of reconciliation!

We have all grown up in families and communities of less than perfect people. Things have happened, words have been spoken, relationships have been strained and even broken. Jesus calls us to forgive, no matter how the other responds to us, and we will be forgiven by God. Forgiveness melts the pebble of anger that can grow in one's heart. Forgiveness makes us free to live life fully.

Finally, Jesus says, (6:38) "give, and it will be given to you... for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Jesus' sermon on the level plain is a message for us. Ronald Allen says that, "If we act on it, we, the witnessing community will extend the mercy of God to those who may otherwise face destructive lives. Second, when we extend mercy, we will find that our own experience of mercy deepens in our lives. And finally, the church becomes the model of what the kingdom of God is about for other communities."

In a world divided, where the cry for freedom is about me and what I want, Jesus comes to us and says, "But I say to you, love your enemies, do to others as you would have them do to you, and be merciful as your Father is merciful." May we follow this life-giving message. Amen.

By Audrey Mierau Bechtel