

Luke 6: 27-38
February 24, 2019

Grace and peace to you God our father and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ!
Amen.

Yet again, Jesus presents us with some difficult teaching in our gospel passage this morning. It's a wonder that anyone listening to Jesus's words for the first time continued to follow him. But we know many did continue to follow him, learn from him, and were opened to a new way of life.

While these words of Jesus are often challenging to live out daily as children of the Most High perhaps part of the problem is that we may view these words merely as yet another set of commands. That is, do we hear them as just a set of rules? Do we immediately sense the impossibility to adhere to them leaving us in an endless cycle of despair or sense of failure? I don't believe Jesus intended any such feelings when he uttered these words all those many years ago.

Jesus' words spoken were not meant to bring condemnation upon those who were listening but rather were an invitation to once again be part of a new Kingdom and a new way of life he was ushering in. These teachings were yet again a picture of what that Kingdom of God looks like and a portrait of who God is. God is merciful and God is kind even to the ungrateful and wicked.

These words spoken by Jesus recall words spoken by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai just prior to giving him another set of teachings that were also a gift, an invitation, into kingdom living. In Exodus 34 the Lord proclaims to Moses that the Lord is a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

This is our starting point. As children of the Most High we are called into relationship with a merciful, loving, compassionate and forgiving God. What Jesus lays out before us in this passage is nothing more than the heart of God revealed for the world to see in the life of Jesus Christ.

Years ago, during my Clinical Pastoral Education, I was visiting with a patient who amid the pain and suffering of the illness he was experiencing that led to his being hospitalized was also struggling with this faith. He had a near death experience and as he was slowly beginning to recover he looked at me and said he had been a terrible Christian. He had failed to live up to so many of Jesus' teaching. He had succumbed to the depths of despair that he simply couldn't forgive some of the people who had hurt him so much over the course of his life. He was feeling guilt for holding hatred in his heart toward some of these people. People who at one time had been close friends of his. He desperately wanted to change. He wanted to forgive. To love. But he didn't know where to start.

It pained me greatly to see this man wrestle not only with a physical illness but also with this spiritual struggle that was wreaking havoc on his soul. Sometimes the old saying goes, "we are our worst enemy." And so I reminded him of the God whom Jesus presents in this passage. A God of mercy. A God who is kind even to the ungrateful and wicked. I assured this man God was even merciful to him when he felt he had failed in living up to Jesus' teachings.

It seems part of this man's problem was the inability to forgive himself. Or to see that God could forgive him for the times he struggled to adhere to Jesus' teaching. He needed a reminder of who God is. He needed an invitation to once again find life and a new beginning through the grace of Jesus Christ. A window into the glorious kingdom of God he was invited to be part of.

And so as we talked he asked how to begin living into the beauty of this kingdom; because, he said it's not easy. It goes against so much of what we know and how the world around us responds. He wanted to change, but we all know change can be difficult.

I have found in life the concept of "baby steps" helpful in bringing about transformation. That is, focus on one small thing – a "baby step" – to bring about the change you want. As we continued our conversation this man kept coming back to one individual he detested. He described it as hate for something that had happened years ago. He never stated exactly what that was but he knew the anger, resentment, and bitterness were taking a toll on his own well-being

physically, mentally, and spiritually. He wanted to move beyond it but he didn't know how to do it. And so we talked and I offered him a "baby step." What if, I suggested, you wrote down the name of this individual, carried it with you, and simply prayed for them each day for a month? Was that manageable I asked? He nodded and agreed he could do this. That was the last I saw of that man so I don't know how the story ended up but perhaps this is the "baby step" we can all take.

Somewhere I heard it said, "It is hard to be angry at someone you pray for daily." And so, this is an invitation, to join me to pray for someone we may deem our enemy. Someone who possibly has hurt us. Someone we may harbor feelings of anger and bitterness for. What if we simply take a "baby step" and pray for them? For a week. Two weeks, or even a month. Or with the season of Lent on the horizon, maybe for those 40 days.

Let us pray. God of mercy, help us to pray for our enemies. Help us love as you love. Help us each and every day be a community that witnesses to and extends your mercy and reveals the presence of the kingdom Jesus ushered in through the gift of his life. Amen.