



“Feeling the Love”

A Sermon Based on Luke 6:27-38
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, February 24th, 2019
by David Oliver-Holder

Loving your enemies has always been a radical idea. We see that very plainly in the scene from Genesis. Long before Joseph’s brothers had wanted to kill him, for many reasons, some not altogether bad. Joseph was primarily a spoiled brat. He was daddy’s favorite. They had to work. Joseph stayed around the house. Joseph, the youngest, the lowest man on the totem pole, wore a special coat, given to him by his father, a coat which daily rubbed the brother’s faces in his undeserved and nontraditional top rank.

On top of all of that, Joseph had dreams, dreams which he delighted in retelling, dreams about how the rest of the family, nay, even the rest of the universe, would bow down to him. A day came when it was too much.

And so the brothers wanted to do away with him. But instead of killing him, they sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt, and the brothers thought they were done with him.

Joseph’s journey was just beginning. Bought by a high official, Joseph worked for him until the day the official’s wife tried to seduce Joseph. When he refused to give in, she cried rape, and Joseph was thrown into prison. He was there at least two years before he was brought forth by Pharaoh to interpret some dreams.

Because of Joseph’s wisdom and discernment, given to him by God, he is suddenly and unexpectedly freed from prison and raised to the second highest office in all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. For seven years, Joseph over-sees

a great public works project, which will set aside a portion of each year's harvest, so that when the seven years of famine comes, Egypt will be ready.

Life was good for Joseph, even two years into the famine. But one day, his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. He recognized them but they did not recognize him. What would he do?

Certainly he instantly remembered all that they did to him, all of the suffering he endured and so long. No doubt he had certain feelings about all of that. Now, they were completely within his control. He could do what he wanted with them. He could exact revenge for so many years of suffering, all of it unjust suffering. What would he do? What would you do?

What Joseph did was toy with them for a time. He made their lives chaotic and traumatic. First, he held one of them as a hostage, until they returned with their youngest brother. He played mind games with them by placing their money in their sacks of grain, causing them to wonder. Then, when they did return, he accused them of being spies, and threatened to keep the youngest brother. They were terrified, and rightly so. They were at his mercy.

This is where we join the story today. Did Joseph love his enemies? Yes, he did, and the reality is simply amazing. The brothers, realizing who he was, and realizing that he intended to do them no harm at all, were dazed. They didn't know what to do. They couldn't believe it.

So Joseph called them close and embraced them. Thoughts and fears of revenge were broken, as a family once torn apart is restored with joy.

II

Love your enemies, Jesus said. Do good to those who hate you. These words are as radical now as they were then. How can a sensible person love someone who hurts them? How can we love someone who gossips about us, who cheats us, who uses us or coldly ignores us? How can we love an enemy when everything we feel inside about that person makes us want to hurt them as they have hurt us?

Oh, we perhaps can talk about love once the playing field is leveled, once we have exacted our sweet revenge. We might talk about love when the scales

of justice are in balance once again. But love our enemies before revenge? Love our enemies without the expectation for revenge? Love someone without any thought of getting even?

That is what Jesus is talking about here. And the reason is simple: revenge doesn't work. The scales of justice can never be exactly balanced. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, when people were calling for revenge after his house was burned down, "When you live by the rule 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', you end up with a nation of blind and toothless people."

So Jesus tells us to love our enemies. Do good to those who hate us. But how in the world do we do that? How do you love someone for whom you feel no love? Before doing the countercultural, the counterintuitive act of loving an enemy, you have to do something else that is countercultural: you have to recognize that love has little to do with feelings. Our culture is one that believes everything is based on feelings. That is a lie. Love does not depend on how we feel.

A woman tells the story about her first love affair. She had gone out on a date with an attractive young man. It was one of the first dates she had gone out on, and she felt sure, by the time the dinner was over, that she was deeply in love with him.

After the meal, as she sat listening to him and gazing into his eyes, she felt more and more lightheaded. She said that when she looked around her, the whole world looked different, that it kind of faded out, that nothing seemed to her to be as vivid as the young man's smiling face and nothing quite so clear as his calm strong voice.

"He filled my eyes," she said. "He was the only thing I could think about - the only reality that I could connect with."

When asked what happened after that, she said, "I was taken to the hospital and I had my stomach pumped. The doctor told me I had a case of food poisoning."

You cannot tell if you love someone simply by the way you happen to feel at the moment about that person. Our feelings change. They come and go. We can feel the same feeling in different contexts.

So feelings are completely unreliable when it comes to evaluating or acting on love. Think about your relationship with your closest family members. For you who are married, can you honestly say that you always like your spouse, that you always feel good about her or him, and that you always want your spouse close to you? Do you always feel a tremendous fondness for a brother or sister, and you never have the feeling that they annoy the stuffing out of you?

Of course not!

When we stop to think about the matter, we know that our love cannot be based on our feelings. Our commitment, a commitment rooted in and shaped by love, cannot depend on how we feel at any given moment.

Love must be based on something else. It must be measured by something more substantial. That something else is action. Love is known in action. Love is a verb.

Jesus makes that perfectly clear. He tells us what love does. Love blesses rather than curses. It is merciful as God is merciful. It forgives as God forgives, without any expectation of reward or vengeance.

And then Jesus says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." It is the great rule of love, the great rule by which you can tell if you are loving someone even when you don't feel like it.

III

So how can we love someone who is unlovable? We must first resist the temptation of our culture and stop believing its lie that love is only a feeling. Feelings can be unreliable. Then we must act.

The proof, the evidence of our love is known in the way that we behave toward one another. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." That is the great rule of love; it is a rule that begins with DO.

The spiritual promise that comes with obedience to the rule is this: the judgment you give, is the judgment you will receive; what you sow you will reap.

Give and it will be given to you - a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be given to you.”

It is a promise rooted in relationships. We don't forgive because we are altruistic. We don't bless because we are such good people. We forgive because we know we need forgiveness. We bless because we know we need blessings. We show mercy because we know we would be lost unless abundant mercy had been and is shown to us. We do to others as we want them to do to us because there is no other way to break the cycle of evil.

Love is the only act that can overcome hate. Blessing is the only act that can overcome cursing. Forgiveness is the only act that can ultimately right a wrong.

Joseph seemed to know this long ago. He forgave, he blessed, he loved. But Genesis would not have us hold Joseph up as a hero. He would not wish to be so known. For what he says, what the story tells us, is that God had been at work in all that happened, from the first betrayal of Joseph, to the healing of the breach at the end.

God is the one who was acting. Joseph was obedient. And in his behavior, Joseph is God-like. He is a symbol of God. For he was rejected by his own people. He was treated and suffered unjustly. Nevertheless, God forgave. God blessed. God loved.

When we obey, when we trust God's way with us, we, too, become signs of the kingdom. We become God-like. We become Christian, Christ-like. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes loving, forgiving and blessing hurts. But there is no other way.

And so we love, not because we want to do others a favor. We love because we have been loved. We love because we have been transformed.

For that good news, Thanks be to God. Amen.