

Our Love
Luke 6:27-38
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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This Epiphany Season we have explored what it means for us to be Children of God. When we are baptized, we are marked by God in a special way, as we commit ourselves to follow Jesus. What are the implications for our identity and our ethics?

One implication we have explored is that we must live an ethic of “covenantal neighborliness,” to use Walter Brueggemann’s term. Here in today’s passage, part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, we get the most radical edge of Jesus’ message. We are called to view even our enemies as neighbors.

Hear now this sermon of Jesus, from the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, 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; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Heavenly Parent is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

“As if the Beatitudes were not radical enough, the sermon now pushes vulnerability to fresh extremes,” writes Brendan Byrne in his commentary on this passage. Jesus wants us to love our enemies. What can that possibly mean, and how can we possibly do it?

Byrne writes that Jesus wants us to respond to “injury or unreasonable demand with nothing but generosity and the abandonment of all claim to retribution or restitution.”

This is clearly a very different way of living than our contemporary American culture teaches us. No revenge. No getting even. No carrying hatred or bitterness. But generosity, vulnerability, and love.

Now Brendan Byrne wants to let us off the hook a little bit. He admits that Jesus is speaking in exaggeration: “[Jesus] is not laying down maxims to be followed literally,” Byrne writes. Rather, Jesus wants us to aim at being “as extravagantly generous as possible.” Even to the degree that others think we are foolish.

I’ve talked before about our attitudes to the vulnerability of the human condition. One way we often respond is to try to control every situation in order to minimize our vulnerability. The theologian Elizabeth Gandolfo writes very critically against this attitude in her book *The Power and Vulnerability of Love*. There she identifies privilege as one of the ways we try to minimize our vulnerability.

Two weeks ago we heard Lawrence Richardson preach about joy from the margins. We heard from someone who did not grow up with privilege. He grew up African-American in a predominately white neighborhood. His parents were impoverished teenagers with mental illness. As a child he experienced neglect, homelessness, physical and sexual abuse.

And yet he stood before us a successful minister filled with joy. He couldn’t escape the vulnerabilities of his human condition. Instead he has embraced them and grown stronger, more joyful.

Those of us with more privilege have socially acceptable ways to minimize our vulnerability and try to ignore it or control it. Elizabeth Gandolfo writes, “Privilege is the produce of human anxiety over vulnerability; it is a collective attempt to alleviate anxiety through control of vulnerability.”

Our privileges help to buffer us from the risks of human life, but the problem is that the way privilege generally works in this society is that some have it and others do not. The underprivileged are then harmed by denial of resources or access to power and influence, and thereby they suffer even more. Gandolfo writes that privilege, then, ends up causing more suffering and enacting greater harm.

So, instead, Jesus wants to cultivate an ethic of neighborliness, of generosity, of vulnerability. But how do we do it? How do we follow Jesus in ways that are healthy?

Recently I read a fascinating book *Light in the Dark* by Gloria Anzaldua. I wrote my column in the newsletter about it a few weeks ago.

Anzaldua was an American scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. *Light in the Dark* is a discussion of how we put ourselves together again after we’ve been broken apart by trauma.

She wrote, “We are all wounded, but we can connect through the wound that’s alienated us from others.” I believe this wisdom helps us to understand how we follow Jesus into an ethics of vulnerability and generosity that loves even our enemies.

Anzaldua drew upon an Aztec myth of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. In that myth Coyolxauhqui is dismembered and then restored. The myth resonates with the story of Jesus—wounded by the crucifixion and carrying those wounds into his resurrected and glorified body.

From the Aztec myth, Anzaldua developed what she called “The Coyolxauhqui Imperative” which is “the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us.” In other words, how we put ourselves back together again after we have suffered.

She continued,

The Coyolxauhqui imperative is to heal and achieve integration. When fragmentations occur, you fall apart and feel as though you’ve been expelled from paradise. . . . Coyolxauhqui is also my symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing.

For Anzaldua, after wounding we enter an in-between space. We’ve been unmade and haven’t yet remade ourselves. She called this in-between space *nepantla* from a Nahuatl word. It is the site of imagination and the possibility of transformation, for, she wrote, “We can transform our world by imagining it differently.”

When we are in this in-between space, we are able to get in touch with our shadow sides. She wrote, “Our collective shadow—made up of the destructive aspects, psychic wounds, and splits in our own culture—is aroused, and we are forced to confront it. In trying to make sense of what’s happening, some of us come into deep awareness of political and spiritual situations and the unconscious mechanisms that abet hate, intolerance, and discord.”

In other words, after we are wounded, we are able to see the shadow sides of human nature—ours and everyone else’s. This vision enables a new imagination, to see the world in a different way.

I also believe this vision enables us to understand our enemies differently. We see their vulnerability, their woundedness. We understand better what we share in common. Anzaldua encourages us to learn from our experiences of trauma and to turn those experiences into the creative powers necessary to lead ourselves and others into a new and better world.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he isn’t calling for us to ignore their violation of our dignity. No, he is calling for us to recognize even theirs. He is calling for us to find solidarity in our vulnerability, and to then turn that realization toward imagining, that ultimately works to create a better world. A world where violations of our dignity are less likely to happen.

Jesus calls us to a radical love, that is inclusive, expansive, generous, neighborly, and vulnerable. A love that treats everyone with dignity.

Let this become our love, for we are children of God.