

Do the Impossible
Luke 6:27-38

February 20, 2022 Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

²⁷"But I say to you that listen,
Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
²⁸bles those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;
and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you;
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.
³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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.

³⁵But 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 he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, 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."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks Be to God.

One of my favorite stories of Christian faith comes from the Christian writer, theologian, and nonviolent activist Walter Wink.¹ The story he tells is of two Christian peacemakers working in Europe after World War II. About ten years after the war the couple, named Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr, met with a group of Polish Christians. After a few hours of reconnecting, the couple asked this group, "Would you be willing to meet with Christians from West Germany? They want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war, and to begin to build a new relationship."

Silence. Nobody wanted to speak or respond. Finally, after a minute or two, the leader of the group spoke up, and said to the couple: "Jean and Hildegard, we love you. You are our friends, but what you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive."

¹ Wink, Walter. *Collected Readings*, Fortress Press, 2013. p. 229

Before they all parted ways for the evening, they gathered together for prayer, closing with the Lord's prayer. "Our father who art in heaven..." They all prayed along. Until they got to the words, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive..."

Everyone stopped. Complete silence again. Then the same leader who had spoken up earlier, spoke again, saying to Jean and Hildegard, "I must say yes. I could no more pray the Our Father, I could no longer call myself a Christian if I refuse to forgive. Humanly speaking, I cannot do it, but God will give us the strength." A year later, they met with the German Christians in Austria, starting up friendships that lasted the rest of their lives.

I find this story deeply encouraging. Especially as I look at our world today, and see the deep divisions and pain. See individuals and groups that will have nothing to do with one another. How much of our world is about competing against or defeating or keeping away from those we consider our enemy? How much of the time do we believe there are only two ways to live – be victims, or seek vengeance. There must be another way, a third way, a way forward that is not just more and more division and bloodshed, anger, and hurt.

I also find this story encouraging when I consider my own doubts. Doubts = about our strength as people, and faith, and what we can actually do as followers of Christ.

The words Jesus has for us today seem at first reading to be so big, so daunting, and so impossible. Love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Do not judge. Give not just your coat, but your shirt too. Lend, expecting nothing in return. Forgive.

These are not easy commands. And they are so difficult, so challenging, that many of us would like to respond to Jesus today with the same words of that Polish Christian 60 years ago: "What you are asking is impossible." We might think of them as nice sounding words from Jesus, but more pie in the sky hopeful, than anything we could ever actually do. Love our enemies? Pray for those who hurt us? That's a nice sentiment Jesus, but we are not really going to live that way, right?

And sadly that has been really the church's main way of looking at these words for way too long. We, the body of Christ, have not been good at loving our enemies, forgiving and blessing. Instead, the church has a long history of casting enemies away, locking them up, or even burning them at the stake.

And the reason is, we have not trusted in Jesus' words. We haven't trusted that this message is a true possibility in our lives and in our world. That there truly is this third way of reconciliation, love, and grace. We haven't believed that God can really give us the strength to the impossible.

But always there has been at least a small group of people of faith who have trusted these words, who have believed in them and worked to live them out. And when they do, the world changes in incredible, hopeful ways. I think of the work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the mid-1990s. With his leadership, black and colored South Africans told and heard the truth of the horrors of apartheid – houses being stolen, children going hungry, family members being tortured, even men having tires lit on fire and thrown over their heads. Terrible injustices no person, let alone a whole country

should ever have to know. Yet, at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, Tutu led the community in not just hearing this truth, but actually facing the perpetrators, and offering forgiveness. Where could you get the strength for that? When asked by Bono, the lead singer of U2 years ago, Tutu told him it was only through prayer. As hard as the job was, as impossible as it seemed, God would give him the strength, and the people of South Africa the strength to move forward.

In a less famous way, I got to see this third way of Christ's grace and reconciliation first hand. The church I served as a Young Adult Volunteer in Northern Ireland had been burned down in 2002 by a sectarian arson attack. A Catholic Church had been attacked the week before, and now this Presbyterian Church was attacked, and sadly much more successfully. All that remained was the brick façade. Everything else was ash. There must have been so much grief, so much anger, so much desire to make the perpetrators pay.

At the same time, rumors started that a Catholic family across the street had played a part in the fire, especially their eldest son. There may have been some truth to it, that some of their own neighbors had done the burning. But when that family was itself attacked as another reprisal of violence, Rev. Liz Hughes responded the next day. She gathered a group of elders and deacons of the church, prayed together, and then walked across that street. They knocked on the door of the family, and with a basket of food and meals they said, "Whatever has happened, whatever you may or may not have done, you are our neighbors, and we are here for you." And they hugged and prayed and cried, and found themselves to be a church well beyond any walls.

My main hope for all of us today is that we trust that God will give us the strength to do the impossible. To forgive those who have hurt us. To love even our worst enemies. To break down longstanding barriers and walls of hostility. To create relationships and friendships that go past skin color, wealth, political views, and even religious views. And to trust that that is the holy work of Jesus Christ. Amen.