



"GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES"
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 6: 27-38
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, February 20, 2022 (Hybrid Worship)
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Luke 6: 27-38

6:27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, 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.

6:31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

6:32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

6:33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

6:34 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.

6:35 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 he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

6:37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

6:38 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."

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

What is the hardest part of being a Jesus follower for you?

I anticipate that some of the things that are really hard for some of us, are right here in this passage.

Love your enemies.
Turn the other cheek.
Give without expecting anything in return.
Don't judge.
Bless those who curse you.

When we're honest about what it looks like to really live this out—it is hard. And Jesus' invitation can feel pretty daunting, maybe even guilt inducing—or maybe something we try to deemphasize to ourselves.

Maybe we like to think being a Jesus follower is an identity we can claim in other ways—like by belonging to this church, or wearing a cross, or praying, or donating money to causes we care about, or... well you fill in the blank about how and why you claim the identity of being a person of faith in your life.

Today, we're going to sit right here in these very clear directives from Jesus and we're going to be honest with ourselves and each other about how hard they are.

It's a golden opportunity, really. To pause and notice. To be present and to name some things.

When Jesus is as clear as he is here and we are as pressed as we are in our world with easy examples of people who are very hard to love and reasons why we can't just give, give, give and with good reason to protect ourselves and brace ourselves and sequester ourselves away from the people who do not wish us well.

Before we go any further, a few important and fine distinctions about what this sermon is NOT.

This sermon is NOT an opportunity for us to claim that the NT has a more virtuous ethic than the Hebrew scriptures around justice. We will not succumb to that false binary—that the Hebrew scriptures are legalistic and then Jesus comes along and shows us the loving way to be.

This sermon is NOT an opportunity to hide behind the superficial claim that being Christian is about being nice to everyone. Jesus is not talking about being nice here. And nice is a smoke screen lots of times for some dysfunctional, destructive, and de-humanizing ways of being a community.

This sermon is NOT an opportunity to justify emotional martyrdom or staying in an abusive relationship, or doubling down on co-dependent ways of being in relationship. Human beings can take just about anything and twist it into something harmful. And some of the directives Jesus makes here have been twisted into ways of holding people hostage in abusive situations.

The sermon is NOT an apologetics for the way this passage gets misused and distorted.

Instead, it is a golden opportunity for us to grow together in our capacity to see ourselves more clearly and to grow in our capacity to truly follow after Jesus, a man who mediated God's love and justice in the way he moved and breathed, and he called us to do and be that, too.

Golden opportunities are stitched into every moment of our lives. We can miss them though because of all the things I just mentioned—the judging, the ranking, the tyranny of niceness, abusive ways of being in relationship, avoiding going deeper into what following Jesus looks like when it takes on flesh and blood, heart and soul.

This is also a golden opportunity to remember that the golden rule—or the maxim that we should treat others the way we want them to treat us—is not

uniquely Christian. Many paths of faith on this planet from indigenous practices to faiths practiced across cultures and contexts have this ethic embedded in their teachings.

So while we are inquiring together about Jesus' directives to us, we make space for the fact that this ethic is not unique to Jesus. That's an important part of this shimmering golden thread that stitches its way through the human family's story.

At the heart of humanity is a yearning that we not be vindictive or retributive or nefarious. That we collectively treasure what it means to see ourselves in each other—to honor and ennoble each person by treating them with the respect with which we would like to be treated.

If this is our deep collective yearning—a desire across cultures and contexts, then why is retribution and punishment and violence the strongest thread that runs through systems of justice across this globe? Why is this golden rule so foreign to the ways we actually treat each other in the human family?

Jesus starts with the enemy—the one seeking to injure, the one who is antagonistic, the one who is hostile toward our well-being, that which is harmful or deadly.

Think about your life—who or what is your enemy?

Who or what is hostile toward your well-being? Who or what is harmful or deadly to you? Who or what is seeking to injure you?

And don't forget to look in the mirror when you are looking for the enemy.

Hostility toward your well-being is often something we don't need anyone else to help us with—we can deploy enough self-judgment and hostility toward ourselves to do the job for them. We internalize the brutality of judgment and punishment and shaming and blaming and commodification. We can be our own worst enemy.

And then what happens to the golden rule? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you are your own worst enemy, then how will you treat others?

It's a conundrum really. And I see the stealthy way self-hatred has been the most effective tool of oppression in the world. And the way we have bought into lies about how horrible human beings are. Capitalism is built on the assertion that we are all self-interested, profit seekers.

Christianity, with all the love and freedom it boasts of theologically, became one of the most withering tools of judgment and punishment and hatred this world has ever seen. The military might of this world wouldn't have done a fraction as much damage as it has done without the mythology of God on our side.

So, the real question Jesus is asking us here is are you able to love yourself? – are you able to be good to yourself, to bless yourself when all you do is hurt yourself, to pray for yourself when you just keep hurting yourself.

Of course, this is not the only enemy Jesus is talking about, but if we don't start with the one we walk around with every day, then how will we ever be able to meet the others with anything close to the compassion Jesus is asking us to embody?

One of the bullet points we should always have with the golden rule is the "hurt people, hurt people."

A trauma-informed deployment of the golden rule would truly change the world.

In my doctoral work at Emory I had the golden opportunity to learn from and be a teaching assistant for a Tibetan Buddhist monk from the Drepung Monastery, the Dalai Lama's school and lineage. I learned a lot about Christianity from what he taught me. One of the things that made the deepest impression on me was the utter absence of hostility that he embodied. He just never took the bait. When students didn't do their work, when entitled people

demanded grades they had not earned, when someone was rude. Hostility is not something he received and it is not something he extended to others.

There was a deep knowing that he was always immediate to—that our cellular interdependence with all beings is where our relationships always live and breathe. How we react and respond impacts how others treat us, yes, but also there's something less obvious about what is really happening when we impact others.

Our most powerful tool is our cellular interdependence. When I take a deep breath, it changes the situation. When I remember not to react, but to stay present, then I can really change the situation before I have even said a word. And when we do react—or we lash out, we fuel the fire of the hostility we are reacting to.

Human beings and human society suffer from acute inflammation. And more inflammation does not heal inflammation.

Shantideva, a Buddhist monk in the 7th and 8th centuries, described the contours of dependent co-arising—that all things arise upon causes and conditions. And one of his most vivid descriptions is one where he uses this concept of enemy. Those who we perceive as enemies are actually our greatest teachers. Without them we could not truly cultivate a practice of compassion. So, we are grateful for our enemies, and the ways they hasten our enlightenment.

One could say that Jesus is a good Buddhist here—he was embodying and teaching a disposition of non-attachment. It is not de-tachment, it is non-attachment. The difference between detachment and non-attachment is love and compassion. Detachment is dispassionate. Non-attachment is compassionate—a deep knowing of interdependence and connection that practices not getting hooked to the emotions, not grasping because the connection is the whence of the compassion, not the reaction, not the emotion.

One's wisdom and growth arise from one's connections—and that deep connection cannot be broken no matter how much we do not want someone in our lives.

Can you feel the Holy Shift here? Cultivating compassion in our bodies happens at the cellular level—not just in what we do, but in how we imagine ourselves in relationship to all others.

That's why staying in an abusive relationship makes no sense as a way to live out Jesus' teaching. When we stick around for others to abuse us, we are hurting them, too. When we interrupt patterns of abuse, we are humanizing our abuser more radically and impactfully than if we just stand there and take it.

Jesus talks about turning the other cheek—and without this deeper analysis, that can sound just like “stand there and take it.” Remember to breathe and pause, and sit with Jesus' invitation. Humanizing ourselves is humanizing our enemy. Jesus is talking here about humiliation—the act of trying to humiliate us with a slap to our face.

If we have access to our true identity—to our belovedness, that gesture of humiliation is not going to tell us who we are. That hostility is not going to violate that truth. So, when we move from that deeper space of self-knowledge, we do not need to react by answering an attempt at humiliating us with an attempt to humiliate someone else. And by succumbing to using violence to answer violence, we actually violate ourselves first.

That's why this passage cannot be used as justification for staying in an abusive relationship. This passage is about the humanizing and healing impact of interrupting systems of violence and humiliation. Sometimes leaving a situation is the most humanizing, healing way to say to yourself and another—we are better than this, we deserve to stop hurting each other.

The places where we are most prone to react, well those are exactly where the golden opportunities of following Jesus exist. He gives us a way to see ourselves differently in those situations. When we know ourselves to be

beloved, when we cease being our own worst enemy, then we are not grasping at hierarchies or possessions or being right all the time.

The truth is that these golden opportunities can be excruciatingly difficult to embrace. They aren't all that easy to value in a culture that tells us to grab all that we can for ourselves and to get them before they get us. The glare of the fools' gold of capitalism and supremacy can make it hard for us to believe that the elemental gold of right relationship will really get us anywhere.

That's the call that has a hold on all of us, Grace Covenant, the need, the yearning for right relationship—for finding God when we find each other, when we find ourselves. Maybe the hardest part of following Jesus is realizing the depth of how much our lives depend on living this way, this more excellent way. Maybe the hardest part is realizing that depending on each other is not a choice at all, but a brute fact—we belong to each other is not a moral statement, it is a biological and elemental truth. We just choose whether to honor it or squander it, whether to make it medicine or a weapon.

And that's pretty much where Jesus ends up here—the fruits of faithful living mean you will get back what you are willing to put in. That's how golden opportunities work—their treasure is only realized when we embrace them for what they are.

Thanks be to God.