

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today Jesus says to us, according to the Greek, if you are still listening:

²⁷"...Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Today I could say, buckle up cause this is gonna get ugly...but we don't have seat belts in the pews, but as Jesus says, just keep listening. We hear Jesus telling *US*, yes us! We are all still in that level place that we heard about last week just before Jesus started preaching the Beatitudes. And now this week he asks if we are still listening and if we are, then, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Jesus comes down with the twelve to that level place and gathered with a great crowd of his disciples...followers of Jesus, or students of a teacher, so yes today we hear Jesus telling *US* to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us, if anyone should strike us on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away our coat do not withhold even your shirt. We are to give to everyone who begs from us, be merciful, do not judge, do not condemn, and forgive others. So how does this sound to us in the context of the culture we live in today? Jesus also says to us today,

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

But in the context of our social attitude today, our response is, do to others *before* they do it to you! How do you suppose this is heard within our political arenas today? How does this sound standing in the tension along our nation's borders today? How does this sound in the small racially homogeneous communities throughout this country verses how it sounds in the racially and socioeconomically diverse neighborhoods of our urban communities and inner cities? How do we...today at St. Paul hear these indicative and commanding words of Jesus? Are we going to simply tune out until we hear what we like? As much as we want to jump up on our moral high-ground, we are knocked down, to this level place with Jesus and he is making it very clear that there is no room in Christian ethic or our Christian faith for vengeance or retaliation.

I learned as an undergrad, Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative that basically says that it is our duty to act in such a manner that we would want everyone else to act in a similar manner in similar circumstances toward other people. Jesus basically says this same thing very simply...for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Jesus said this but Paul McCartney gets the credit for this with his song, "In the End" on the Abbey Road album when he wrote,

"The love you take is equal to the love you make."

This actually means the very same thing, the measure of love you receive in life is directly related to the measure of love you give to others. However, we all want things the way we want them or the way we like them, the way we understand them or the way we feel comfortable with them and woe to those who do not see it this way and get in the way of this.

If we are totally honest with ourselves, our worldview is centered on ourselves and what we know and what we love. We live, act, speak, and react from our personal core perspective, or rather all the things that center in ourselves. But today, Jesus is teaching us to think, to speak, to act and

react...to love and respect beyond the center of ourselves...Jesus is simply teaching us to act or to do to others as we would have them do to us. But the bigger challenge is this, can we dance to this tune that Jesus is playing? I ask this because, like everyone who reads this Sermon on the level plain or even the Sermon on the Mount, we hear it from the stand point of, what must I DO in light of what Jesus is teaching.

As I reflected on the passage, I kept tripping over myself and ended up confused and wondering how can I love my enemies, do good to those who hate me, bless those who curse me, pray for those who abuse me. We simply cannot do this, but we tend to react to this sermon with our feeble attempts at this. But this sermon is not telling us to do something we have no understanding of how to do, Jesus is TEACHING us about God's kingdom and God's love for us...he is showing us how we become imitators of God's love in the world and in turn, as imitators of God's love we reveal God's kingdom in the world through that love for others and not our righteousness.

One of my favorite song writers is Jackson Browne. Jackson wrote a gorgeous song entitled, "For A Dancer." This song came up in our Bible study this past week and I think the lyrics of the song explain what I've come to understand about this Sermon on the Level Plain from Jesus.

Jackson wrote this:

No matter what fate chooses to play
(there's nothing you can do about it anyway)
Just do the steps that you've been shown
Until the dance becomes your very own¹

In this Sermon on the Level Plain we learn that we are not dancers of grace and mercy, we are simply learning as an apprentice, we are a person who is learning our trade, our faith, our Christian ethic and piety from the master artisan...Jesus Christ. We are the student dancers learning from the ballet master...learning how to dance to life with grace and mercy for others and we imitate until the Master's steps become our own.

Later on in chapter eleven of this Gospel from Luke we learn that Jesus was praying in a certain place and one of his disciples says to Jesus:

'Lord, *teach us to pray,*
as John taught his disciples.'
² [Jesus] said to them, 'When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
³ Give us each day our daily bread.
⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.'
(Luke 11:1b-4)

And we continue to pray these words that Jesus has given us...the words we have been taught by Jesus to pray as our own.

¹ "For A Dancer" Jackson Browne, Swallow Turn Music, ASCAP, a compilation of Browne's work on two CDs entitled, *The Very Best of Jackson Browne*, disc 1, track 8. Electra Entertainment Group, 2004.

When we hear this sermon from our appointed Gospel lesson today, we look at it from our perspective, our understandings, our confusion, and from our context, and we quickly conclude that this is what we must do...even knowing we don't know how to do this. But when we get ourselves out of the way and listen to what Jesus is teaching, we may just learn that Jesus is teaching us how *GOD*, the Ultimate Master looks at us, the lowly apprentices at the foot of the master...learning the craft of our faith and our piety, until one day when the grace and mercy that is before us become our own...the day when we can love our enemy, when we can do good to those who hate us, when we can be merciful as our Father is merciful. But until then, yes, this is a difficult lesson to learn, but what makes it difficult is we make it about ourselves and in doing so we miss the intent of this passage. This Sermon on the Plain is not about making our lives better; this sermon is about making *GOD's mercy know*, making God's love know, making God's Kingdom visible in our mortal lives! And we begin this by doing what Jesus is teaching us to do, recognizing that Jesus is teaching us and revealing to us the Kingdom of God.

This sermon is showing us a theology of reversal. In other words, God's salvation is a work of righting an up-side-down world and turning it right-side-up.² So by the very standards set in this sermon we realize our need for Jesus not just to read and pray with us, but to be with us in our failures, and therefore to recognize the mercy, the grace, and the salvation we have in HIM...and not in our own works or deeds. When imitating this sermon, may we also recognize that this is not about what we can or cannot do, it is what God will do, is doing, and has done to reverse the ways of this world, to reverse sin and death into the righteousness and salvation through Jesus Christ and not what we can or can't do.

God loves enemies, God does good to those who hate, blesses those who curse (thank you God), God offers more; God withholds nothing. God through Jesus Christ Gives grace and mercy to everyone who seeks, asks, knocks, or begs. God through Jesus Christ is merciful, does not condemn, and God through Jesus Christ has forgiven others and God through Jesus Christ forgives us. In this Sermon on the Level Place, as it is known, we have the image of the Kingdom of God and that Kingdom breaks into our world through these actions in the Sermon when we the church imitate them until we can do them with Jesus.

Does this mean then these things will make us better? NO...we remain the sinner we are with the promises Jesus gives to us. Bonhoeffer made this point when he wrote:

The child learns to speak because the father speaks to the child. The child learns the speech of the father. So, we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us.³

God has spoken His Word to us, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we learn to *first* listen and we learn to speak and we learn to act just as the Father speaks and acts toward us, His children. And in doing so, we learn the speech of our Heavenly Father until the words become our own.

² Van Harn, Roger E.. The Lectionary Commentary Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: Gospels. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001. The commentary based on the appointed Gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C Luke 6:17-26 by David Holwerda, page 333.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Psalms, The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress: 1970. Page 10-11.

Yes, this sermon on this level place is a difficult lesson to learn and to follow through with it is even more challenging, but St. Paul knew this when speaking to the church of Corinth and to us... he writes:

⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved (brothers and sisters), be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:54-58)

May God’s love given for us in Jesus Christ become the very love we give to others...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.