



NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

The Rule of Love

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

February 24, 2019

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷ "But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do 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. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.^[b] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be 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; 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."

In the small town of Benton Harbor, Michigan, just a few years ago a story of forgiveness and reconciliation played out on the national stage. Andrew Collins was a young, white police officer who had arrested a young black man named Jameel Mcgee for dealing drugs. Jameel was convicted and spent four years in prison. The catch? Jameel was innocent; the officer made up the incident, falsifying police reports. In 2016, when the story was covered on the CBS evening news – in that last segment where they like to end on a heartwarming human-interest story –

Officer Collins acknowledged outright what he had done and admitted that it was wrong. He and Jameel have made amends, mostly because they've had to. After Jameel's case was overturned and he was released, he found a job at a local café run by a faith-based employment agency, the kind of place that focuses on helping people find jobs after getting out of prison. When he showed up at work, he was introduced to his manager: Andrew Collins, the same crooked cop who had put him in prison. Collins had eventually been convicted, himself, and served a year and a half in prison. We can assume that he then found himself looking for employment with a conviction on his record, same as Jameel, so it's not surprising they found themselves working for the same non-profit.

The news segment was decidedly light-hearted, showing clips of the two men working together behind the counter, with the reporter describing the close quarters they now share while showing footage of the two of them literally bumping into each other as they do now on a daily basis. According to this news segment, Collins told Jameel he was sorry for what he had done to him, and Jameel says that's what he needed to hear. The two are more than just co-workers now, they're friends, and they've even written a book together about the power of forgiveness. CBS News certainly has their formula down to a science: it's nothing if not a heartwarming story.

But it's not the whole story. I didn't learn about Jameel Mcgee and Andrew Collins by watching CBS News; I heard about them last summer when a reporter with NPR's *This American Life* encountered the story and was so put off by the overly sentimental tone of the coverage that she decided to dig a little deeper. She found that what the news coverage had failed to mention was that Collins hadn't just put one innocent man in prison. He had lied on police reports and warrants – even lied on the stand – in 62 cases, all of which had been either overturned or thrown out. His small town had to pay five and a half million dollars in settlements for civil rights violations. In her episode she plays one clip after another of talk show hosts celebrating the story of Andrew Collins and Jameel Mcgee without any mention of the 61 other victims who might not be so quick to forgive Collins, or to forgive the police department that allowed this to go on for as long as it did. This reporter then goes and talks to a few of them; I won't recount the entire

episode, though it is worth your time. She ends the show in a place that I can completely understand, though I couldn't quite get on board.

This segment of the episode is titled, "You Have the Right to Remain Angry," and that's essentially where she lands it, with one of Collins' other victims saying that all "that forgiveness [stuff] is overrated." This reporter concludes that maybe it's not so bad to bear a grudge forever, particularly if it turns out to be the thing you can hold onto that keeps you sane. And I see where she's coming from. In the face of the kind of corruption and cover-ups that were clearly running rampant in this small town as in so many others in our nation, there's a case to be made that forgiveness is a weakness; that the lifting up of forgiveness as a virtue is a tactic used by the powerful to keep those under their power meek and subservient. And I think she is absolutely right to point out the culpability of a news industry that highlights feel-good stories of people of color forgiving their white oppressors without delving into the larger issues of racial inequity beneath the surface. Whether it is intentional or not, it carries the same thrust as the "slaveholding religion" of the American South, emphasizing forgiveness and submission over righteousness or justice. "America seems to love this kind of story of forgiveness," she says – and she's right, because stories like these distract – or worse, excuse – us from the more difficult task of collectively addressing systemic injustice.

"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. ...Forgive, and you will be forgiven..." What are we supposed to do with that? I think we ought to agree first on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness does not mean sweeping under the rug. Forgiveness does not mean the absence of accountability. Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek, but I don't think he ever meant for us to lose our eye contact with the one who raised their hand against us. When we forgive, we look one another in the eye, because in looking into the eyes of our enemy, we draw out the humanity within them – and we refuse to allow them to ignore our own.

When I was a sophomore in high school I joined the drama club, where I learned I could count on getting cast pretty much any time I auditioned, except it was always as a middle-aged woman – not usually the part I wanted. That year the school did a production of the play "Radium Girls," a story about a lawsuit in the 1920s involving women at a factory in New Jersey who

suffered radiation exposure from painting watch dials with radium-based paint. They had been instructed to “point” the paintbrushes with their tongues to keep them sharp, and ingested a lot of radium as a result. I was cast as the middle-aged wife of the man who ran the factory, who couldn’t bring himself to believe that radium – the miracle cure for shrinking tumors – could be the cause of the rash of illnesses breaking out among his employees. He pushed back against the lawsuit, and so in our teenage minds, he was, of course, the bad guy. Now, most of what I remember from that production has to do with the expander in my acting partner’s mouth and how close we had to stand to one another, embracing in these emotional scenes; he was much taller than I was and through no fault of his own, his expander caused him to spit...like, a lot. But that posture of standing in an awkward teenage embrace is perhaps the more valuable memory that has stuck with me; it was a lesson in empathy – not for my acting partner but for his character. It was the first time I had ever had to consider the notion that the villain might have a wife, might have people who loved him, might not even have bad intentions at all.

When I hear Jesus’ teaching in the gospels to “love your enemies,” I often struggle to come up with anyone in my life who might constitute an enemy. Now I’m a fairly conflict avoidant personality, so I’m sure that has something to do with it, but the word “enemy” just has a degree of drama and intensity about it that doesn’t seem to fit with much of my experience in the interpersonal arena. Some of us have been hurt in very direct ways by people we have known in relationship, and maybe for you, using the word “enemy” doesn’t seem like such a reach. We all bring something different to our reading of the scriptures. But I do know that for myself, where this teaching begins to make more sense is when we move beyond the level of individual relationships and into the social realm of systems and institutions. It is not difficult to locate systems within our culture that I can unflinchingly claim to be enemies of the common good, enemies of the kingdom of God – often because of how they have been corrupted; rarely does anyone set out to create an evil institution. Our broken criminal justice system is certainly one. Our reflection last week on the revelations about sexual abuse in Baptist churches is another example of a system that has become the enemy of its own mission. And when we allow ourselves to feel the full weight of these broken systems and those whom they have victimized,

it can be particularly difficult to hear this teaching from Jesus, but because I believe there is truth in it, I'll read it again:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

What does it look like to love our enemies? There are as many ways to answer that as there are enemies in need of love. But perhaps some of the other instructions Jesus gives here might help us find our way into love – like when he says, “pray for those who abuse you.” To pray for a person is to see them through God’s ever-loving eyes, the eyes that see everything that has brought this person to be as they are, eyes that leave us with no choice but to remember their humanity, with no choice but to love them. The first step in learning to love our enemies is to remember that they are already loved. When we remember their humanity, we can see a little of ourselves in them, maybe even a little of them in us. When we remember their humanity, we gain perspective, we are reminded that we are all connected, all a part of something larger than ourselves. And so, when we remember their humanity, we could never brush aside a grievous wrong – that’s not what forgiveness is about; it’s *because* we remember their humanity that we must hold our enemies accountable for their actions – particularly when we’re talking about systems as enemies. The challenge is to engage this task without a hint of condescension, superiority or judgement, knowing that but for an accident of birth, that could be us; like I said, rarely does anyone set out to become evil. Loving our enemies requires forgiveness, but a *responsible* forgiveness. Love does not look like skirting confrontation; love is the brave one who walks into the fray of fraught relationships, knowing there’s something worthwhile waiting on the other side.

Did you notice – this passage is also where we find Jesus’ expression of the golden rule? “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Talk about shared humanity, this rule is the moral compass of love, and it’s a rule that can be found in most any religion under the sun. This Rule of Love for our neighbors, for ourselves – it is the bedrock foundation of the kingdom of God. There are many who struggle with the language of a “kingdom,” who question whether it communicates to us what Jesus intended to communicate. I’ve wondered if a more faithful expression than “Kingdom of God” might be the “Rule of Love,” for it seems to me that when

love rules, we all rise. We all rise because under the Rule of Love, we are held to a higher standard than we might ever choose for ourselves, a standard that requires of us things like loving our enemies; like praying for those who abuse us; like choosing forgiveness again, and again, and again.

In the piece from NPR, the premise was that when we are wronged, we have the right to remain angry. And certainly, in a society that whitewashes stories like the one told on that episode, using forgiveness as a euphemism for turning a blind eye, we need voices who will call that out, who will harness righteous anger for the greater good. Anger is an important part of the human experience of grief, and I believe it has a place. I also believe it's an easy place to get stuck. But the good news of the gospel is that there is hope beyond the anger. Once we've allowed ourselves the time we need to sit with our anger, to really see it – not to deny it or push it down – then, and only then, if we can release it into the expansive heart of God, we can watch it transform into something healing, something *good*: real forgiveness, forgiveness rooted in the difficult work of reconciling broken relationships. This is where we place our hope; this is what the Rule of Love brings into being.

Going back to watch the original clip from CBS News, I was mostly as skeptical as the reporter from NPR, but there was a moment that will stick with me. It was a moment that seemed genuine, not as manufactured as most of the video must have been. Toward the end of the interview with Jameel and Collins sitting side by side, the reporter asked Jameel, "Did you forgive for his sake, or for yours?" Jameel answered, "No, for our sake. Not just us," he said, gesturing toward Collins. "For *our* sake," he said again, this time gesturing toward the room, the community, the world. Say what you will about how the media used this story of forgiveness for twisted ends; the story itself still holds power. In Jameel's act of looking that man in the eye and choosing to let go, something like the Rule of Love was brought to life.

So, Northminster, where are we in this story? Perhaps you are the one who has been wronged. On an individual or a social level, you have been hurt, and you now face the choice of how to respond. You have the right to remain angry. But when you're ready, you also have the hope of something more.

For others of us, perhaps you can see in yourself, in your actions or even just by virtue of your positions of privilege, that you are the one in need of forgiveness. You have the choice to pursue reconciliation. Know that when you do, as trying as it may be, you are a part of ushering in the Rule of Love.

May we encourage one another as we walk the difficult road toward healing and wholeness together.

Amen.