

Luke 6:27-38

Do What?©
February 24, 2019

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

I love some of the things Mark Twain said. Like this one: *“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”*

Ain't that the truth? There are some things in the Bible, particularly the things Jesus said, that we might prefer to not understand. Like this week's text, for example, where Jesus says to love our enemies. To turn the other cheek if someone slaps you. Letting anger go. Or giving them the shirt off your back if they steal your coat. Lend money, or other things, to them and don't ask for repayment. And don't judge them. Love sinners, even though they aren't your friends.

Do what??? Surely Jesus doesn't mean that.

Do you do like I tend to do when I think of enemies? I try to conjure up in my mind someone who just doesn't like me that much. There've been a few over the years. I worked with a woman, a long time ago, before I was a pastor, who seemed determined to push my buttons.

I don't know why she didn't like me but she prodded and pushed until one day, the simplest little statement caused my lid to blow off. I lost it. I screamed at her for a good ten minutes, it seemed, while other coworkers sat in pure shock. I really don't lose my cool like that. But she pushed me over the edge.

I guess we all have that boiling point. At least I found out I did. And she made it even worse by then saying, “Now we see what you're really like.” She's lucky that I went and hid my face in the bathroom for an hour.

It seems like we are seeing enemies everywhere these days; the news is filled with stories of violence; our politicians are constantly at each other. I wonder sometimes if people in other countries think we are at war with one another.

Almost everyday there is something new – a shooter walks into a place of work or school, a church or a restaurant, and fires. You know the stories. How could we miss them?

Those would be the kinds of enemies I would have a hard time loving. People who really are out to do physical harm. And I think most of us would ask, “Jesus, you don't really mean for us to love those enemies, do you?” There is no way he could expect that. Is there?

Yet there seems to be no reason to see it different – there's no other interpretation for this. In fact, if you would go through and read all of this sermon on the plain, you will come to realize that Jesus' teaching is just turned upside down.

But then we think that's just not who we are today. Surely Jesus wouldn't say those things to us in this post-modern era. With terrorism, with political ridiculousness, with

people slinging slander at us right and left. With social media bullying. With name calling. That probably didn't go on back in Jesus' day. It probably wasn't that hard to love your enemies then. Right?

Except. Then we realize that in Jesus' day, the Jews were under the oppression and the occupation of the Romans. And the Romans were ruthless often times. Or, when the gospels were written, the temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruins.

So, there really is no reason to think that Jesus words to love enemies was meant for them but not for us. And we have to come to realize Jesus isn't using some metaphor here. He isn't speaking some secret code for a different meaning. He really is telling us to love our enemies. He really does expect his disciples (us) to be different than the rest of society.

But why? Why can't we just act the same way everyone else acts? Why should we be different? Why shouldn't we get revenge when someone hurts us?

But, that's the thing here. We are disciples. If we have made those profession of faith vows that we witness every time we ordain someone or we baptize or welcome a new member, then we are a disciple. You can't really be a genuine Christian (a Christ follower) without being a disciple – one who follows.

I mean, you could be a disciple who's got her head in the sand, ducking from all the teachings Jesus' gives. You could just be a procrastinator, thinking that eventually you will begin to do what Jesus' says. But we really aren't true disciples until we have made the commitment to do what he says. We forget sometimes that the ultimate goal for us is what Jesus commanded as he was about to ascend to heaven after his resurrection.

Remember? He said to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words, the work of a disciple is to do the work of the teacher and to gain even more disciples – for their sakes – their own salvation – and for the sake of the gospel spreading all over the world.

We are called to look like God's kingdom here on earth. We are commanded to be different so others will see how different God is. Our tendency is to be like everyone else. But our calling as Jesus' people is to follow him, even though he usually calls us to go the opposite way from our culture. To show a different way. A way of love. A way of peace. A way of welcome and hospitality. Of forgiveness.

One of the most powerful examples I can think of, of loving enemies, comes from the story of Gwen and John Haspels. The Haspels came to speak to the congregation I served in Kansas. They were Presbyterian missionaries who worked in Africa, in Ethiopia. Their home base is Kansas.

At the time the Haspels came to us they spoke of trying to build a road to the other side of the mountain where they lived and how the Suri people there were beginning to become Christians. They told stories about girls and women who had been badly abused and disfigured and how they began to see that they were still loved.

But they also expressed how much violence and danger there was in being there. Our church was very interested in sending a group on a mission trip to help them, but it never came to fruition, although our Sunday School offerings and other fundraisers did support the Haspels financially and helped to build the road.

After I came here to Holly, I heard the news that they had been attacked and injured. I want to share their story with you. It comes from our General Assembly office in Louisville:

For nearly 40 years Gwen and John Haspels lived as mission co-workers in Africa, teaching love and forgiveness in cultures of violence. In Ethiopia, the native Suri would often tell the couple that they could not understand the depth that kind of forgiveness requires, but on October 1, 2014, the tragic events that unfolded on a rural road in Ethiopia changed that.

On that day, as the couple traveled on a road to a house they were building for a Bible translator—a road they had traveled dozens of times—a gunman jumped out of the bush and fired. A car window was open, and a bullet hit Gwen just above the lip, shattering her jaw. Many of the 20 teeth she lost turned into razor-sharp projectiles and hit John’s arm and chest. A bone fragment hit him in the eye.

“The first of many miracles was that neither of us went into shock,” he said. “Gwen wiped the blood from my eye, and we drove away as fast as we could.” He said the four native Suris riding with them to the construction site immediately jumped out of the moving car, as self-preservation kicked in. One of them later told John that the man who fired the gun quickly disappeared into the bush with a blanket over his head, a sign of shame. Because they were driving a different vehicle that day, they felt certain he didn’t recognize them until after he fired.

They drove to the nearest town and then were transported by ambulance to a hospital in Addis Ababa. The couple’s doctor told World Mission’s regional liaison for the Horn of Africa, the Rev. Michael Weller, that more than 200 people gathered at the rural hospital to show their love and support. Almost 1,000 were present when the couple left the airport in Addis Ababa for a Level 1 trauma center in South Africa, one of the best in the world.

“They came through the emergency room wailing, and some collapsed with grief,” said Gwen. “Some even came into the operating room. There was no way to keep them out. It’s simply the way they show love and concern.”

Some weeks after the attack, a group of Suris told John they were going to find and kill the man who shot at them. He immediately said “no” and began an ongoing conversation about forgiveness. Daughter Heather spoke with the Suri representative to parliament, Lanjoy, who is a personal friend of the couple, to communicate the family’s message and their sincere desire that the man who did this would come to know Jesus. The Suris were told that John and Gwen were not angry with them “and continue to love them as they always have.”

“We have always taught the importance of praising God, of forgiveness and reconciliation, and now we have the chance to live it,” said Gwen. “The cycle of killing and revenge must be broken among the Suri people. It can only be done by the heart-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ by forgiving and being forgiven.”

Safely back in Kansas after retiring from mission service on June 30, John and Gwen are still seeing doctors regularly as they recover from their injuries. Because of a detached retina, John has no sight in his damaged eye, but does have some light sensitivity. They are hopeful that his sight can be improved or restored eventually. Gwen has had several plastic surgeries, and the next step is to repair the inside of her mouth and replace lost teeth. She has been working regularly with a speech therapist.

On the anniversary of the incident, John is headed back to Ethiopia to baptize 1,000 new Christians. World Mission’s partner is the Ethiopian Church Mekane Yesus, which numbers more than seven million. John also hopes to see the man who shot at them and offer his forgiveness. “Our prayer is that he will come to know Jesus,” said Gwen.

(End quote)

What would the point be in being the Church – which is made up of Christ followers – or disciples – if we did not learn from the one we follow and if we did not persist in doing what he teaches us to do. We are to be different. We are to persist in getting it right so others see that difference and understand that we are living according to a different standard. We are modeling the kingdom on earth until God’s final kingdom is established with the return of Christ.

When we, who are disciples of Jesus’ strive to love enemies, persist in going against what our culture thinks is right, and show love and peace instead of hatred and revenge, we have the power to transform people and relationships. It’s possible that God can take that small thing we obediently do and change lives and situations.

It’s not easy. Jesus did not say it would be easy. But with his help, it is possible. He asks us all to try. To persist. To strive for excellence. Because really, that’s exactly what he has given us in the cross. Jesus, nailed to a cross to die because of love for sinners, asked God to forgive. He offers mercy, forgiveness and hope; amazing grace – salvation, transformation, redemption ... and eternal life.

© Copyright 2019. All Rights Reserved.