



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
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LOVE RULES: LOVE OTHERS

January 15, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Matthew 5: 43-48

This morning we continue our January sermon series, *Love Rules*. We're spending this first month of 2012 focusing on how the love of God needs to rule our lives. Mark Stephenson started us out on New Year's Day, on how the light of the Christ child needs to rule our everyday lives. Last week Rev. Dave focused us on loving God, and our response to God's grace through baptism. Next week we'll talk about the importance of loving ourselves, and Jay Sowell will end our series by addressing the importance of loving change in this world – yes really, loving **change** – if we are to faithfully build the beloved community on earth.

Today our focus is on how we love others. But before we delve into the scripture lesson, let me just say that today I'm trying really hard to love others; specifically the people at Boston University, who yesterday lured my younger son Josh back east under the pretense of something they call "spring semester."

Last fall I took this picture of BU's Marsh Chapel; in the foreground is a statue entitled "Free at Last." It's a memorial to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who in the mid 1950s received his PhD in systematic theology from the school of theology at BU, a United Methodist university which was the first mainline seminary in the US to admit persons of color.

A bit of history on this weekend of remembrance and service: it was while Dr. King was at BU that he met and was mentored by the great mystic and theologian Howard Thurman, who was the school's first African American Dean of Marsh Chapel. It was Dr. Thurman who introduced Brother Martin to Gandhi and the concept of non-violent resistance. In the 1930s Dr. Thurman had led a delegation of African-American pastors to meet with the Mahatma and learn how they could utilize his non-violent principles to overturn white racism in the United States, and mentored Dr. King in the same way. In turn, Dr. King developed his philosophy of non-violence resistance as the basis for social change based on two principal teachings: those of Gandhi, and those of Jesus which we find in our passage from Matthew's Gospel for this morning, which is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount.

This is the first of 5 intentional teaching sessions of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. Each of the 4 Gospels was written for a specific community; Matthew wrote his gospel for an audience of Jewish Christians, whom he wanted to help understand that they could both follow Jesus and be faithful to the God of Abraham and Moses and Ruth and Esther.

Chronologically, at this point Jesus has been baptized by John; he's called his disciples together, and begun his ministry of teaching and healing. And the crowds have begun to follow him in great number. So, Jesus climbs up on a mountain to teach about a new way of living and loving

God, and how that new way will bring forth the kingdom of God – the beloved community – on earth.

We read the text from the contemporary version called "The Message," but the three main points from any translation are pretty universal in defining Jesus' rules on how we love others:

Love your enemies.
Pray for those who persecute you.
Be perfect, as your Creator in heaven is perfect.

Let's start with the first one: Love your enemies. Someone once said that everything Jesus taught can be found somewhere in the prophets--with one exception: love of enemies. That was one teaching of Jesus that was indisputably new--and indisputably counter-intuitive.

{in the}Torah, [we find the] command to love one's neighbor (Lev 19:18), but that same command also presumes that one may hate those outside the tribe. [the torah says] "You shall not hate anyone...of your kin," which means that you may hate those not of your kin. "You shall not take vengeance...against any of your people," but those not of your people are fair game.¹

Jesus says no. That's not what God wants. He wants us to love everyone, period, without exception. Now, that doesn't mean acquiescing to evil, or allowing ourselves to be abused. Loving our enemies doesn't mean allowing another person to indulge in hurtful behavior towards us or others. But it does mean changing the way we deal with our enemies, either real or perceived.

Thomas Merton, a monk and mystic and [a contemporary of Dean Howard Thurman,] once wrote:

"Do not be too quick," he wrote, "to assume that your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you were capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.

Do not be too quick to assume that your enemy is an enemy of God just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy precisely because he can find nothing in you that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears you because he can find nothing in you of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weakness of [humanity].....

In other words, whom I label as enemy may say more about me than about them.²

That's a lesson it took me years to learn when it came to both religion and politics. I couldn't fathom those of a different political or theological bent to be anything but an enemy to be defeated, and the "truth" as I understood it to prevail at either the ballot box or within the church. Now, I haven't lost my passion for what I consider the gospel truth to prevail at both, especially when it comes to issues of equality and justice for my gay, lesbian and transgender brothers and sisters within the denomination; but I have come to understand that those of differing viewpoints aren't my enemies. At all. They simply haven't been adequately witnessed to. Amen? And it's up to me to model the way of Jesus in dealing with those with whom I differ, or else I cannot hope to effect change in them, or in our system. The way in which we approach those with whom we disagree, or consider "enemies," is as important as our base

viewpoint. And I truly believe if we treat one another with respect and love, that Gospel understanding will shine through in unexpected ways.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said we are to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. If we believe that love really rules our lives, by extension we believe that it's possible to create a blended family – whether in marriage or extended friendship or within a community of faith – that has at its core love for one another. That defies what society says “should be” the norm. That models a new way of living and loving. That puts Christ at its center.

And that prays for one another, especially for those who offend or persecute us. Because sometimes that offense or persecution doesn't come from enemies at all, but from those you love.

Let me start this next story by saying that I pray for our church staff every day. Some of them more than others.

Right before Christmas – Mark Stephenson bursts into our worship planning meeting and declares that while Eddie Lucero and his crew have been installing a new door from the balcony into the tower – turn around and see it – a cluster of bats flew into the sanctuary and were lodged up in the rafters. I was horrified, not only because Chad and I believe bats are just rats with wings, but because they are nocturnal and it was only a few days before Christmas eve.

Then Gilbert Cheng, our wonderful facility manager with the driest sense of humor ever, came in and spoke eloquently about how the custodians had found deceased bats in the sconces over the past year – something he had failed to mention before.

At this point I'm just about having a meltdown. Rev. Dave, the voice of reason, says I'm going down to take a look. He comes back and shows us this picture of a sparrow, down here trying to drink water out of his pitcher on his table.

But I wasn't convinced. So on Christmas eve, if you were here, you might have caught me doing this (looking up sideways at ceiling) – just checking to make sure no bats came swooping in when the lights went down during Silent Night.

Last week I mention to Mark how I had kept watch on Christmas eve. He doubles over with laughter and says: don't you know that was all a joke? That there never were any bats?

My brothers and sisters, in the words of Ashton Kutcher: I got punked this Christmastime. By people I love and pray for. And I still love and pray for. I offer that story to you as a humorous example of what it means to pray for those who offend or persecute you.

Because here's the reality. It's easy to pray for, say, extremist Presidential candidates or pastors or people in the media because even though their words and positions might offend us, chances are we will never engage them personally, nor will they have the opportunity to directly our lives. In other words, it's easy to pray for people in the abstract. It's much harder to pray for those folks we have to deal with in our everyday lives.

Jesus understood this, which is why he gave us rule # 3 for loving others: be perfect, as your Creator in heaven is perfect.

This is perhaps the most perplexing of Jesus' teachings. Winston Churchill nailed the issue well: *they say that nobody is perfect. Then they tell you practice makes perfect. I wish they'd make up their minds.*

When Jesus talks of perfection, he's not talking about the absence of errors or mistakes, as we humans consider perfection. Instead, he's referring to the way in which God acts towards each of us.

I refer to that great theologian, Charlie Brown. It is a good system, because it's God's system. It doesn't matter if we are good as gold or as flawed as can be – God loves us equally, and God's actions towards us are not based on the amount of our sins, but on the fact that we are each created in God's good image and there's nothing we can ever do to be separated from God's gracious love. Amen?

Perfection, in fact, means that we are acting towards others like God acts towards us. "the root meaning of the word 'perfect' is undivided, whole, complete," Ronald J. Allen writes....." Following the teaching of Jesus, then, leads to wholeness and completeness in all aspects of life and in all people not by focusing on the self but on living and loving others.³

Our Haiti mission team offers one example of not focusing on the self, but on living for and loving others. So do all our ministries focused on caring for our neighbors in need. But the point of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not that we need to go somewhere else to incarnate God's rules for loving others; or to allocate only a specific amount of time and energy to a given project that is distinct from our daily lives; we need to practice them so that they are innate to who we are. Whether it's with a co-worker that annoys us, or a neighbor that has it out for us, or a relationship that needs healing, or our own recognition that we need to be more proactive in loving others through selfless acts of service, we need to follow Jesus' instructions

To love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and be perfect as our Creator is perfect.

Two final thoughts:

"Former Boston Red Sox Hall-of-Fame third baseman Wade Boggs hated Yankee Stadium. Not because of the Yankees; they never gave him that much trouble but because of one fan.

The guy had a box seat close to the field, and when the Red Sox were in town he would torment Boggs by shouting obscenities and insults.

One day as Boggs was warming up, the fan began his routine, yelling, 'Boggs, you stink' and variations on that theme. Boggs had enough. He walked directly over to the man, who was sitting in the stands...and said, 'Hey fella, are you the guy who's always yelling at me?

The man said, 'Yeah, it's me. What are you going to do about it?' Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to his pre-game routine. The man never yelled at Boggs again; in fact, he became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium."

*Love your enemies. Be perfect as your Creator in heaven is perfect. It might change them, and we know it will change you.*⁴

We know love has changed the lives of those who follow the teachings of Dr. King, who once famously said *"I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."* Because whenever love rules, we are indeed free at last.

Amen.

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¹ John Petty, blog posting February 14, 2011, http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2011/02/lectionary-blogging-matthew-5-38-48.html

² Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 1, 1986

³ As quoted by Kate Huey, Weekly Seeds, February 2011, <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/expanding-boundaries.html>

⁴ Story source unknown.