

Listen

Luke 6: 27-38

Well, here it is; the place where most of us tune Jesus out. I mean, if we're hanging on after hearing that you're blessed if you're poor, hungry and weeping, and we're still listening, we get some of the craziest advice anyone has ever heard: Love your enemies. And just in case you think that you can explain that away by saying the most loving thing I can do for my enemy is kill him and put him out of my misery, Jesus goes on to define it a bit: "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, turn the other cheek, if someone takes your stuff give them more of it, and don't try to get paid back." Honestly, all of that stuff sounds like a verifiably bad idea. Because you know how the wicked are, they will not see your mercy and kindness, they will see weakness and something to take advantage of. We understand that somehow, some way this has to be a metaphor, not actual directions on how to live our lives.

But it's not a metaphor or a parable, it is actually something that Jesus expects us to do, and it's where a lot of people who claim to love Jesus and follow him, simply will not go with him. This is one of those places where a fundamental opposition exists between Jesus the Christ and what we understand about ourselves and the world. Most of us have this idea that, at some point, everything was perfect. God made everything and sat back, satisfied with his handiwork and everything was good (by which we mean perfect, no sin, no death, no homework, ice cream that doesn't make you fat, whatever your particular dream is). Then along come a couple of humans who decided to break the only rule that God made for them. Surprisingly, this theme emerges in multiple religious systems not just our Judeo-Christian story. Walker Percy refers to this as an "aboriginal catastrophe," and it explains the presence of evil in the creation. God, or gods then become the heroes attempting to salvage the creation from the consequences of our bad decision making. In this scheme, the Christ moment is that place where the villain finally goes too far and pushes the hero over the line, the cross seems like a defeat, but it's not... Ha! Resurrection! You fool! How did you not see that coming? Aboriginal Catastrophe healed, sin atoned for, death defeated, all that good stuff.

That idea makes good sense, honestly it does, that's why our religions tend to default into it somehow. But Jesus, pretty consistently points us to something else: suffering and trials are going to happen, that's not a sign that the creation is flawed, it's simply how things are, God has made these things and seen that they are good and God is involved in drawing all things in to something called love. Love is the beginning and the end and everything in between. This does not imply that the cursing, the abuse and the taking advantage are somehow okay, it rather gives us a prescription for how to deal with those things in a godly way instead of in a way that just feeds the beast. See, It's always been a mystery to us, how a good and all powerful God allows things to be the way they are. What we want from God is a reckoning, some of that justice that the prophets are always going on about. We want the smiting of enemies and the destruction of those who work against righteousness. We can live in that bubble for an awfully long time, but Jesus, if we really listen to him, is trying to burst that bubble.

He doesn't go against the idea of righteousness and justice, righteousness and justice are, in fact, good things, noble goals that we should pursue with all our ability. He is not saying that sin is not indeed a catastrophe. He is not condoning evil or saying that the "enemies" are really good people, or even that they're just all part of God's plan, what he is offering is a way for those of us who listen to deal with them. Oh and by the way, he walks the walk as well as talks the talk, all the way to Golgotha.

Look, we see Jesus get upset at injustice, we see him weep for Jerusalem and ask for the cup to pass from him. This is not some sort of Zen Buddhist detachment, he's not saying that everything is secretly good or that suffering is really a path to enlightenment. What he is doing is giving those who listen a way to deal with what is and was and will be that does not magnify the evil but magnifies the good. We have been created to love and love is a choice not a feeling. We have been given the capacity to love and to hate and God challenges us to choose love, the way that God chooses love. Catch this: the choice to love is demonstrated through kindness, God is kind even to the wicked. Jesus is not saying here that God is pleased with wickedness or with the wicked, but God does choose to love them.

This is really good news for all of us, because one of the things that goes unspoken in a lot of Jesus' teachings is that our illusion of righteousness is just that, an illusion. Jesus' life shows us many examples of how he viewed the folks that everyone called righteous: the priests, the scribes and the Pharisees; this lot was a brood of vipers. It also shows us that he had great compassion for the ones the world called "sinners," he healed them, he welcomed them, he called them his friends and his brothers and sisters, he definitely loved them in a way that was designed to heal them, not break them even more. Jesus shows us a way to heal things not conquer them. This peculiar set of challenges then is a glimpse into the way that God loves the world, it is a pure love that is not self-serving, it is a generous love that does not judge for the sake of condemning, it is a love that forgives and heals, and does not continue the cycles of violence that so often spring up out of our attempts to be "righteous."

The Jesus way can seem upside down, it can seem like a mystery and an insurmountable challenge, until you realize that the love that is being called for, is only the love you have already been given. The grace that you are called to show, is only the grace you have already been shown. The measure you give is the measure you get, do unto others as you would have them do to you, the rewards that come from showing mercy, kindness, love and grace are not just given in the age to come, they make your life, right here right now, full of those things. Listen.