

Sunday, February 24, 2019 – Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
“Extreme Love”

Luke 6: 27-36

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Text/Application

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Welcome to America in 2019. Outrage has become a virtue. Anger has become proof you care. Rumors are fact. Truth is, well, just like your opinion, man. Let me be clear – this is not a left or right problem, a young or old problem, a coast or flyover problem, a man or woman problem, a background or culture problem, it’s an American problem. It’s a human problem. It worms its way into families. It infects churches. It gets into our hearts, right here in this room – including my own. It’s always been there but now it blasts on our airwaves and social media gives everyone their own megaphone – and we drown in cacophony of angry voices, caustic tweets and we mark each other friend or enemy accordingly.

Jesus’ words this morning touch us all. Luke records words from a sermon called “The Sermon on the Plain” – not an airplane, a flat, grassy plain. It’s his “stump speech” sermon that always ratchets things up – you may think yourself to have it all together, to love others well but then Jesus’ words hit you between the eyes with God’s seemingly impossibly high standards of what it means to love, really love other people – even and maybe especially your “enemies” and pin us down and make us realize – wow – I messed this one up, bad.

Now let me address this quickly but clearly – Jesus in this text is not telling people who’re being abused they must subject themselves to an unsafe person such as abusive spouse or parent or home – by all means, if you’re in that kind of position please seek help immediately.

Instead, listen to Jesus’ words for what it means to go through life as one of His disciples in a world filled with outrage, anger, rumor and so-called truth: 27 “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

This is all in keeping with what Jesus tells us other places in Scripture. Expect trial by fire. Expect people to reject you, persecute you, speak poorly of you, hurt your reputation *because* of Jesus. We pray that these things happen because of what Jesus brings to the table and not because of our own outrage and anger misrepresenting Jesus and why He has come.

One of my old sem profs, Dr. Jeff Gibbs talks about this as it pertains to his own interest in promoting the value of life and talking to others with this same value. “I have become more aware than ever before of how often “pro-lifers” speak and write and act in ways that flow directly from their own anger. In a practical sort of way, it seems pretty clear that angry speaking or acting will rarely prove persuasive or helpful; it only preaches to the choir of other “pro-lifers” who are also angry. So, I decided that I would like to do something to change the tenor and tone of things. Ironically, the few times I have tried to teach such “pro-lifers” about the New Testament’s teaching about anger, these persons became angry at me and (I am not proud to say) I in return was angry at them.”

Later in this aptly named piece “The Myth of Righteous Anger” he goes on to show I think pretty convincingly that while anger may be normal or understandable in certain circumstances and while it’s really dangerous and psychologically detrimental to deny or stuff away or shame ourselves for our anger, it is too powerful an emotion for humans to wield – it’s pretty much impossible to be “righteously angry” and not sin.

I think part of the challenge about this for many Christians (especially white and Protestant Christians) particularly in this country is that the world changed. Depending on your age, you may have grown up at a time or a place – a region, a town, whatever – that it was normal and expected that others around you claimed to be Christian. It wasn’t a matter of “Do you follow any religion at all?” or “Are you a Christian?” or even “If this person going to be offended if I ask about religion?” but rather “Which church do you go to?” or “What denomination are you?” and even if the person didn’t go to church, they’d still self-identify as being Christian – not everyone, of course, but commonly this happened. In this world the church had a privileged place in the culture – stores were closed on Sundays, activities weren’t planned for “church night” on Wednesdays, club teams didn’t schedule soccer games or batting practice on Sunday mornings, public schools held Christmas programs with Jesus, Joseph, Mary and angels. Many Christians thought it “normal” that the politicians and government would hold the line on certain moral or ethical issues important to Christians (but by the way, if you’re reminiscing and feeling a sense of loss, please don’t whitewash the past too much in your pondering – most non-white people and many women would MUCH rather be living life right now than back in the not-so-good-ol’-days).

And see when we feel we've lost something there are some very common, normal reactions. Fear. Anger. Protection (we circle the wagons). We dig in. Our higher brains – that think, that listen, that have compassion and engage in sacrifice and constructive conversation shut down and fight or flight takes over. And I believe a big part of this is because we *expect* otherwise.

There's plenty of room, policy-wise across the political spectrum, for reasonable people to disagree with each other without sinning on a wide variety of issues. And there are some issues – on both sides of the political spectrum, by the way, where Scripture instructs the lives and values of Christians to be different than things that are espoused in our culture, approved by law or enshrined in party platforms.

So what do we do? When that person posts on social media yet again, when our least favorite news show host is going on, when our family member needles us over the same issue yet again, when we feel afraid and want to go after others? When those conflicts arise – they will and they do, every day – we expect it. We hear Jesus' words – these impossibly high God-standards, confess we can't do it and then remember – Jesus died for the outrage-worthy and anger-worthy offense of our own sin and for the sin of the objects of our outrage. The Father's answer: convict and sentence our sins – on Jesus. Our sins that make us enemies of God are taken on by Jesus in love against us when our thoughts, words or actions betray hate for God's Word, curse against His name and His will and mistreat our fellow humans. He loves us at our most unlovable and enables us to love each other – even at the extremes. Those whose voices stir outrage and anger, who spark fear in us, who threaten us, who come for us. Our fallen bodies and brains go to fight or flight and so we shelter in Jesus and we pray for Him to be our strength. We stop yelling at the world for being the world and ask Jesus' help. Help us to love, to listen, to sacrifice, to have compassion and pray forgiveness when others “know not what they do” – just like Jesus did for us. Maybe, just maybe, we pray and we believe in God's power to do this – our discipline to pray for our enemies, love our enemies will be the very thing – our own moving hands and feet and mouths and hearts used by Jesus in this world for that person to meet Jesus through you and me. That's love in the extreme. That's something we could use a lot more of in 2019. In Jesus' name, Amen.