

As Mennonites celebrate the 500 year of Anabaptism, we are at a position where we can look deeply at who we are and what we have done or thought or believed and determine whether it is aligned with the way of Christ. What needs to be picked up, what needs to go? What kind of housekeeping needs to be done in our own being? In our church? In our community? To realign us best with the way of Christ?

Last week we began reflecting on Jesus “Sermon on the Plain” found in the Gospel of Luke. If you wish to hear it again (or for the first time) check out our YouTube channel. In my sermon last week, I gave some background to the Sermon on the Plain – including some differences between the Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. Today, though, it is enough to say that Luke’s account of the Sermon reminds the listeners that Jesus came down to our level and taught “plainly” in the Luke style. Today we continue the Sermon after Jesus’ blessings and woes.

**Luke 6:27-38**

<sup>27</sup> “But I say to you that listen,

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

<sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you,

pray for those who mistreat you.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you;

and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

<sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?

For even sinners love those who love them.

<sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?

For even sinners do the same.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good, and lend,

expecting nothing in return.

Your reward will be great,

and you will be children of the Most High;

for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

<sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup> “Do not judge, and you will not be judged;

do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

<sup>38</sup> 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.”

I have a confession to make. Peace is a hard-won fight – one in which there is a winner and a loser and peace – in my heart and mind – is frequently the winner – although not until both sides have suffered heavy losses. I say this with some sarcasm because it has been and still is so difficult to claim the peace of Christ as my motivation for responding to people I consider enemies.

Yet what Jesus in his Sermon on the Plain reminds us to live peacefully with integrity. Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.”

We all have enemies. I am guessing that all of you have at least one name, face, or situation in your minds right now, and that if I shoved a microphone in your face, you’d be ashamed to say it because it’s likely someone in your family or here at church or someone that you work with. We don’t want to admit to having this enemy, likely because it feels as though we have somehow failed at what Jesus was teaching.

For people who proclaim the Gospel of Peace, it is not nice, not clean, ordinary or all that acceptable to admit that we have enemies. So we do what humans are best at; we equivocate, spin, redefine, and outright lie to keep ourselves appearing pure and perfect and as from the truth of our situation.

But we are people – therefore we have community – therefore we have relationships within community and sometimes relationships work – and sometimes they don’t. Therefore, we have enemies, whether we wish to say so or not. Admitting a problem is the first step to solving it, after all.

That said, let’s take a closer look at today’s text. It seems very familiar to me – it is, after all, very much like the Sermon on the Mount – which is OUR text! Much of our “Mennonite” way of thinking about Jesus – our theology and Christology - is based on these words! Not only that, but the whole heart of the Anabaptist reformation rests in Jesus’ radical words found in these two sermons.

We have whole books of those who gave their lives rather than recant this gospel. We have made a hero out of a man named Dirk Willems who, having escaped his captors over an icy Dutch river, returned to rescue his pursuer who fell through the ice, only to be, then, put to death days later for his belief in love of enemy. With a heritage such as this, it can feel downright repetitive to speak of what this all means, commending it to our practice.

But we need to do exactly this; practice what Jesus is teaching. You see, love isn’t a noun, it is an active verb, and it is not an easy thing to do even with people that we like but especially with people that we loathe.

Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, 500 years ago argued that the teachings Jesus gave us in these two sermons as hyperbole. They were given *precisely* because they are entirely unrealistic and impossible, and turn us then toward God’s grace as we realize how completely hopeless we are at following them.

The radical thing about Anabaptist thought, when it comes to the teaching of Christ, is that we have long held that these teachings, especially those in these in the two Sermons, are meant for us to practice and follow.

These words are meant to be lived, and breathed, and practiced in the here and now, among all people who would claim the name of Christ. The concept of being a people of peace is pretty far out there—it was then and still is.

The commands of living as a peaceful person, loving enemies and praying for those who mistreat us prods us to ask deep and, often troubling questions.

One. We ponder loving our enemies from the perspective of Augustine's Just War Theory. Some theology says that we can justify killing our enemy if it benefits the state or if it means defeating a manipulative dictator. To do otherwise swings the pendulum the other way – interpreting loving your enemies and living peaceably to mean becoming complacent to evil.

For those who see things only in black and white, it is very difficult to learn that there are also shades of grey that can be more vibrant and effective in resolving conflict.

Two. It must be said loudly and clearly that Jesus' words to "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you" has too often been used to justify the worst kind of abuse within families and often by the church.

Here, using the fear of damnation and exclusion from the community, perpetrators manipulate their victims to believe that standing up for themselves or others is not showing love nor is it living Christlike. Similarly, giving all we have – lending without limits – is one of the most common forms of elder abuse.

Never should we think ourselves as required to needlessly suffer, nor abet the abuse of others. And when we twist these commands to suit our own individual aims, then we are guilty of the worst possible sin.

We have misinterpreted Jesus' examples of turning the other cheek and lending without expectations of a return. We have read these from the perspective of our own culture. But Jesus did not live here in North America nor did he live in the 21<sup>st</sup> C.

Jesus's examples are RADICAL and not at all submissive or passive when we read them from an ancient near-east perspective.

Take, for example, Jesus' reference to striking the other's cheek. In the honour culture in which Jesus lived, to strike someone on the cheek was seen as a supreme insult – and the one doing the striking – especially if done with an open hand – could be fined the equivalent to a year's wages. By turning the left cheek, you are asking someone to be that much more susceptible to the dishonour of being the aggressor in such a case.

Similarly, there were Jewish laws about who could take a garment from someone else and for how long. Jesus' suggestion to offer the shirt after they take the cloak is implying something more than strict passive acceptance of what our enemies dish out (though that is an option). It is a way that the one being forced out of the cloak can reframe the interaction and change the terms of engagement.

It is **never** easy to answer the question of what it means to love the enemy. To answer for ourselves requires deep introspection – to examine our motivations and our fears. Yet it also asks us to be creative in our responses. Living as a people of peace and loving and praying for our enemy is NOT invitation to passivism – to being passive but to pacifism.

Google AI tells me that “while both terms might seem similar, "passive" means simply not taking action or resisting, while "pacifism" refers to a principled stance against violence and war, often involving active, nonviolent methods to achieve peace; essentially, a pacifist may actively work to oppose violence, while a passive person simply does not engage, even when faced with injustice.”

Here in the Sermon on the Plain – and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is challenging us to be creative! To not be doormats but be innovative in our resistance and to change the terms of engagement.

This can be surprisingly effective. Changing the script unbalances things. It defuses the situation and changes the equations of how we interact. But changing the script can also save us. Because to be truly involved in conflict asks us to make an enemy of the other. And that has a cost too.

There is a science to this: to really do the enemy thing well, we have to *dehumanize* the enemy, we have to convince ourselves that they are beyond love, and beyond God’s love. It asks us to carry all that hatred, energy, and violence in ourselves, and demands that we invest in the cycles of aggression and response. It can be quite costly spiritually, personally, and even financially. Much of our economy functions based on the assumption that there is someone out there that wants to get you.

But isn’t it true that when we hold a grudge, we hurt ourselves more than the person we hold the grudge against?

What happens when we release that and free ourselves to do what we are ultimately called to do with ALL of ourselves: Love God with all our heart mind and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves?

Practicing love will transform us.  
God’s love transforms us.  
May we hold on to that hope.