

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 20, 2022)

Text: **Luke 6:27-38** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

“To you who hear me, I say: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. When they slap you on one cheek, turn and give them the other; when they take your coat, let them have your shirt as well. Give to all who beg from you. When someone takes what is yours, don't demand it back. Do to others what you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. If you do good only to those who do good to you what credit is that do you? Even ‘sinners’ do as much. If you lend to those you expect to repay you, what credit does that do you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to other ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. Love your enemies and do good to them. Lend without expecting repayment, and your reward will be great. You'll rightly be called children of the Most High, since God is good even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, as your loving God is compassionate. Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn and you won't be condemned. Pardon, and you'll be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you: a full measure- packed down, shaken together and running over- will be poured into your lap. For the amount you measure out is the amount you'll be given back.”

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

“Mercy Is As Mercy Does”

Do you ever have those times in your life when you make a decision and then regret it? That's pretty much how I felt this week after having decided to go with the gospel selection from today's lectionary passages. I pretty much always get a little nudge from God as to which section of the Bible I'm supposed to explore, but that doesn't mean I necessarily WANT to explore it, you. know what I mean?

This passage of scripture from Luke's gospel, constituting the second half of Jesus's Sermon on the Plain which began with those beautiful beatitudes we touched on lightly last week, contains some of the most powerful and transcendent words ever uttered by Jesus – words, in fact, that one could say provide the basis of what Christianity is for many of us – loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, praying for those you mistreat you and, of course, the good old golden rule – doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

But there are also words that Jesus utters here which can create tremendous challenges for us if we take them literally and use them as measuring sticks for whether we truly are Christians or not -- Turning your cheek to take another blow after you've already been hit once upside the head, stripping off your shirt and leaving yourself exposed so that you may give it to somebody else after you've already given them your coat, not asking for anything back when somebody takes something from you and giving to anyone who begs from you.

For years of my own life, especially in my youth, these directives from Jesus, or at least what I interpreted as directives or even commandments, flummoxed and frustrated me and led me to often despair at having any hope of being a true follower of Christ. Mostly because I felt as if I failed at fulfilling them again and again - so much so, in fact, as to not even feel or be worthy enough to call myself a Christian.

But, here's the thing. The disciples never really got there either. I'm not sure if any human ever really does. Which leads me to understand that it's not so much whether or not we achieve any of these Jesus teachings that makes us followers of the Christ, but it is instead, the journey WITH Jesus we take as we learn to understand these teachings and apply them in thoughtful and meaningful ways that makes us disciples in the same way those early followers were. After all, let us never forget - they'll know we are Christians by our love, not by our report card.

At the primary crux of this particular part of Jesus's plain-speaking sermon is that love, that compassion that mercy that God shows and that Jesus is urging us to emulate. Love one another as you are loved by God. Show compassion to each other as God surely shows compassion to you. Make mercy your mantra even as God provides mercy to you each and every moment of your life.

To be compassionate or merciful as our loving God is merciful and compassionate, our Seasons of the Spirit propounds "is a call to delve into our own vulnerability to see our mutual need for forgiveness, healing and restoration. The line echoes earlier scriptural lessons to be holy because God is holy." And even they admit that this 'is a lofty vision." Going on to say that, "the imperatives of this Sermon on the Plain set high standards, but Jesus is not asking us to be perfect on our own. Our holiness cannot be achieved alone but only through a merciful relationship with one another. Holiness, as God has created as our birthright, is wholeness. We cannot do it apart from divine love."

Yes, once again, it's all about love, you see. Not about measuring up to impossible standards or condemning ourselves because we don't manage to keep this or that rule or act lovingly without blemish in each and every circumstance. It's about the journey with Jesus. It's about walking the way and asking ourselves as we go, "am I being the most loving person I can be in this situation? What about this other one?"

"Is there a way I could have been more loving to that person or to myself?"

"Have I shown love to my partner, my friend, my enemy in the same way that God has shown love to me?"

"It is important to realize here that it is not our perfection that makes us more like Christ, but our compassion born from our mutual vulnerability," Seasons states. "Jesus calls us not only to love what is easy to love, but to go deeper, higher, wider and love as God loves – as a gift freely given, regardless of the worthiness or response. Compassion arises from a

recognition of our shared humanity and vulnerability. Jesus calls us to love the person who has hurt us, to be kind to them, to renounce violence and to work for healing and justice.

“When we admit the truth of our vulnerability and need for others,” they say, “we can be more ‘holy’ in the sense of being connected and a part of the whole.”

Dr. David Lose, in his inimitable way, urges us to see these teaching of Jesus not as commands at all but rather as promises. And I love that.

“The promise” is, he writes, “that it doesn’t have to be this way. That there is another option. That we can treat others the way we want to be treated. That there is enough, more than enough – love, attention, food, worth, honor, time – to go around.

“Jesus isn’t offering a set of simple rules by which to get by or get ahead in this world but is inviting us into a whole other world,” he says. “A world that is not about measuring and counting and weighing and competing and judging and paying back and hating and all the rest. But instead is about love. Love for those who have loved you. Love for those who haven’t. Love even for those who have hated you. That love gets expressed in all kinds of creative ways, but often come through by caring – extending care and compassion and help and comfort to those in need – and forgiveness – not paying back but instead releasing one’s claim on another and opening up a future where a relationship of – you guessed it! – love is still possible.”

I think this is what Jesus was offering to his disciples and all those gathered on the plain that day to hear what must have seemed as radical, if not even more so, in those times where the divides between those who were in control and those who weren’t, and those who had and those who didn’t, were even more obvious and stringent than those of us dealing with these teachings in our day and time.

And, still, it is so difficult to show that kind of Jesus love right now in our so-called modern world, isn’t it? How do we love those with whom we disagree so vehemently? How do we show mercy to those who inflict such violence on everything we think is sacred? What are we really supposed to give when every phone call, email, letter and handheld sign around us seems to be begging us for something?

Perhaps we need to be “Followers of Jesus [who] imitate the God, incarnate in [our] Savior,” Dr. Bruce Epperly asserts. “An all-inclusive, forgiving, welcoming, justice making, relational God.” Perhaps these teachings are inviting us to “become large-spirited persons and congregations, who in the scrum of life, build relationships rather than walls and go the second mile to reach out to adversaries and join God in healing the world, [remembering that] God’s providential presence is motivated by love, healing, abundance, and reconciliation, and this image of divine providence serves as the guide and model for our relationships, ethics, and politics.”

As God is merciful so we are to be merciful and as God is love, so we are to be love ourselves. Amen? Amen!