

Becoming Children of the Most High

A sermon on Luke 6:27-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 February 2022

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Message

God's generosity provides the context for our worship and the model for our living, especially when we are faced with hostility.

Sermon

I saw (and loved) the controversial play *Corpus Christi* a few years back, and one of my favourite lines came after the cleansing of the temple, where Jesus had violently confronted the abusive and exploitative practices taking place there. One of the disciples said, "But you told us to turn the other cheek," and Jesus replied, "I must have been in a very good mood that day!"

I sometimes wonder whether Jesus sometimes wishes he had never said it at all because it has so often been used to justify allowing violence and abuse to go unchallenged, and to lock people into abusive relationships.

It also causes a little Bible reading problem. You see, because this "turn the other cheek" saying is so stark and confronting, it nearly always overshadows the rest of the passage that we heard read tonight and as a result we hear almost nothing else and leave it almost without context. So tonight I want to try to turn it back around the other way. I won't spend much time on the "turn the other cheek" verse, but I realise that it is not fair to ignore it, so I will touch on it briefly.

The passage as a whole is not an encouragement to passivity, but to active generosity. It begins with some sayings about how we should behave towards those who are hostile to us, and then works backwards to show that such behaviour finds its source in the way God treats all of us. I think we may be able to hear it differently, and perhaps even more clearly, if we hear it the other way round for a change, and look at the way God behaves first before then working through to the ways we respond.

The statement Jesus makes about the way God's behaves is brief and to the point. God is merciful and generous to everyone, whether they deserve it or not, whether they are grateful for it or not. God is kind and merciful even to the ungrateful and wicked.

We often hear those words without giving them much thought, but they are a bit of a bombshell if you think much about their implications. Many of us like to think of God as being first and foremost a God of justice and we understand justice to be a two-sided coin: the good will be rewarded and the bad will be punished.

Sometimes the only thing that stops us taking the law into our own hands is the thought that "vengeance is mine says the Lord". We rest assured that God will deal out justice. Those who have been deprived of justice will get the good things they so richly deserve and those who have gone about abusing and exploiting and oppressing will get their just desserts.

Providing you're confident about which side you're on, that is a very popular image of God. But it is not the way Jesus is describing God. If God is a God of justice, it's not the kind of

justice we are used to thinking about and wishing for. God is, says Jesus, merciful, generous and kind to everyone, whether they deserve it or not. Jesus does not say “Love your enemies and do good to them because you can be safely leave it to God to do what you’d really like to do to them.” Instead he says, “Love your enemies and do good to them because that’s the way God treats enemies. God loves and does good to those who hate and curse and abuse God.”

Now this does not sound like good news if you are desperately waiting for God to sort out some utter bastard who richly deserves the fires of hell. But when you stop to think about it, it is very good news and we actually celebrate it as good news every week when we gather to worship.

We celebrate it because when we take a good hard look at ourselves we see that we too have an ugly side. We know that God searches us and knows us, and we know that if God treated us as we deserve on the basis of what that searching reveals about us, we’d be too busy fearing for our own skin to worry about what just desserts anyone else might be going to get. So we cry out, “Lord, have mercy” and we celebrate the fact that the Lord is merciful and generous even when we haven’t deserved it and long before we’ve shown any gratitude for it.

We come to the Table and we are reminded over and over again that God does not return the world’s hostility and violence in kind. Instead of seeing a God who takes it on the chin only to wait seething for an eventual day of judgment, we see Jesus absorbing all the hatred and hostility of the world in the worst that human beings can do to each other, and crying out, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they do.”

And more than that, we see Jesus offering his own broken body back to those who broke him to be the source of their own healing and wholeness. The whole context of the praise and thanksgiving that we offer is a context of completely undeserved love, generosity and mercy.

It is in that context of a celebration of God’s completely undeserved love, generosity and mercy, that we hear Jesus say, “Go and do likewise.” We hear it very explicitly in the gospel reading this week, but this too is a call we hear every week. Every time we gather for worship, after hearing the good news and celebrating God’s love and mercy, we are sent out to “Go and do likewise.” We celebrate Eucharist and then go out to live eucharistically – to live in the spirit of the gratitude we have expressed here; to live out the generous love and mercy with which we have been fed here.

Now if you begin to get your head around this image of God’s extravagant love and mercy, shown to the deserving and undeserving alike, then you can begin to see what Jesus is saying when he says, “Love your enemies and do good to them. And if someone gives you a humiliating smack around the ear, turn the other cheek.”

Perhaps you can even begin to see that Jesus is not calling for a passivity that allows violence and abuse to go unchallenged. Rather he is calling for it to be subverted with love and mercy instead of it being escalated and returned in kind. He is calling us to make sure that the evil done to us or the hurts inflicted on us do not define us and dictate our responses. It is a call to embrace freedom instead of allowing others to control us.

Think about the kid in the schoolyard who instead of turning the other cheek hits back and justifies it to the teacher, saying, “I had to hit him; he hit me first.” Think about that for a

moment. “I had to. I had no choice. Because of what he did, I had no option but to do what I did.” That’s actually a surrender of one’s own freedom. It is making yourself into a puppet who is controlled by the actions of others. And while it is usually children who come right out and say “I had to because he hit me first”, we are all like that much of the time.

Most of us are carrying various grudges and resentments that we cling onto and allow to dictate how we feel and behave around those who have wronged us in one way or another. Instead of setting ourselves free, we allow those who have hurt us to live in our heads and keep pulling the strings of our hearts and minds. As long as we are clinging to a need to see them exposed and made to pay for what they have done to us, we remain chained to them and unable to go free.

So this little set of bizarre suggestions that Jesus gives us begin to make sense when you see how they refuse to let the aggressor dictate our reactions.

If somebody steals your coat, you could respond by getting angry and allowing a sense of grievance to get its claws into you and take control of you. And as likely as not, the thief will be delighted to have become so much the centre of your attention. But what if instead of allowing them to “steal” it, you turned around and said, “Hey, I meant to give you this shirt too, not just that coat. Please take them both as my gift.” Now who’s in control of the situation? Your act of reckless generosity has set you free, deprived the would-be thief of a reaction, and probably embarrassed them. And most importantly, you’ve become a little more loving and generous like Jesus at the precise moment when someone was trying to manoeuvre you in the opposite direction.

“Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you,” says Jesus. Same thing. Are you going to allow them, by the way they treat you, to pull your strings and dictate how you are going to behave? Do you really want to hand over control like that? Or do you want to strongly take control of your own destiny and show that there is nothing they can do to you that can turn you into a hateful, cursing, abusive, mirror-image of them?

Are you really committed to following Jesus on the path of loving and blessing and being kind and merciful to all, or are you going to allow others to derail you every time they do the wrong thing by you? Are you really committed to following Jesus on that path, or are you only committed to it as long as it goes a whole lot better for you than it did for him; as long as nobody tells lies about you, or falsely accuses you, or incites a mob to cancel and denounce you, or jams a barbed wire crown on your head, or crucifies you? Jesus showed us what it can look like to firmly and freely resist the attempts of bitter hostile people to drag us down to their level and make us one of them, and to keep right on loving instead. It is powerful stuff, far from passively enabling abuse.

You see, when Jesus turns the other cheek, it is not as a frightened abused child who has no other option, it is as one who knows that he has the power to call down an army of angels to march in and dispense justice. It is only one who has the potential to respond to violence with equal or greater violence who can meaningfully choose to turn the other cheek. In that context, turning the other cheek is a strong act that unmasks the unjust hostility of the attacker by refusing to come down to the same level. It challenges them to choose between making themselves look even worse or backing down and apologising.

It is never ever ever the Christian response to tell someone who is a helpless victim of violent abuse to turn the other cheek. Only if they could meaningfully stand up on an equal footing with their abuser could such an option mean anything.

What this passage is calling us to do if we are dealing with a person who is suffering such abuse would be to step in and put ourselves in the firing line in their place. We are called to be the other cheek. When we – and I mean we, this is not usually something to mess with individually – when we offer to be the other cheek, we are unmasking the evil that is taking place and offering back the same kind of undeserved and outrageously generous love and mercy we have encountered in Jesus. We are refusing to let the evil escalate unchecked, and we are also refusing to be dragged down to the level of responding in kind.

Not only is that actually a lot more likely to lead to genuine repentance on the part of the abuser and therefore reduce the likelihood of them just repeating it all over again elsewhere, but it is also a far more faithful response to the totally undeserved love and mercy that has enabled us to begin our own journeys into healing, wholeness and fullness of life.

We rehearse that in worship here week by week. The challenge is take it out from here and to live it out courageously and creatively in the face of the insults, hostilities, and resentments of normal day to day life and relationships. To that end, we work and pray.