

When Love Gets Off The Leash

A sermon on Luke 6:27-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 February 2019

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Message

The call to love our enemies is not a new law to slave at, but a call into a culture of love so wild and free and strong that no one can hate it out of us.

Sermon

Once upon a time, Christianity was illegal and regarded as a threat to society and to traditional family values. The empire tried to stamp it out by force, but the more they persecuted it, the more it grew. Then one day, the empire changed tack. Instead of persecuting the Christian church, the empire adopted it as its own. Whether this was sincere decision or a calculating and strategic one, we will never know for sure, but adopting Christianity into the empire neutered it far more effectively than persecution ever had.

What it did most effectively, and is still doing fairly effectively today, was to collapse people's images of what it means to be good Christian into their images of what it means to be a good citizen of the society. You see this at its most glaringly obvious in the idea that patriotism or nationalism is a Christian duty. I think that that is why an actively church-going Christian prime minister like Scott Morrison can still advocate horrific inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Neighbours are those we live alongside, inside our national borders, and so the call to love our neighbours isn't seen to conflict with rejecting and mistreating outsiders.

So we end up with the common misconception that all good law-abiding citizens are more or less good Christians, unless they identify with some other religion, in which case so long as they are still law-abiding and friendly, we'll grant that they are good Muslims or good Buddhists or whatever. Empire can adopt any religion and every religion, so long as it can be collapsed into loyalty to nation, obedience to the law, and friendly relations with one's neighbours. And thus, even in Australia where very few people attend church, it is still quite common to hear descriptions like, "He's a really good bloke. Devoted to his wife and kids. Loves his neighbour. A real Christian."

Whereas, in fact, if there was no such thing as Christianity, this bloke's behaviour would be no different. It would just be described as good citizenship. A generalised niceness that doesn't make trouble for your neighbours or disturb the peace.

The words we heard from Jesus tonight were actually quite scathing about this. "What's so special about that?" Jesus asks. "Anyone can love those who love them and treat them well. Anyone can do good to those who like them and are good to them." Even Peter Dutton and Tony Mokbel can do that.

So Jesus ups the ante. He calls his followers to a love that is on a whole new level. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Now, when we hear these words, more often than not we just focus on the first phrase – love your enemies – and we either imagine that we don't really have any enemies, or we imagine that these words refer to some generalised enemies out there somewhere, people who live in

another country and who hate who we are. And we can imagine that we are loving them, but actually we never have to deal with them in any way at all, so our love never really has to be put into practice.

But Jesus doesn't let us get off that lightly. He is talking about something much more real and immediate, and much more challenging. "When people treat you, yes you, hatefully, return nothing but good. Love them. When people curse you and insult you and spread nasty gossip about you, return nothing but blessings. Love them. When people abuse you and betray you and rip you off, pray that God will bless them. Love them."

There is nothing normal about this kind of love. Most normal people regard it as absurd and unthinkable. And there is nothing easy about this kind of love. One of the things I spent time wrestling with during my recent two week retreat in the desert was precisely this. I was finding it excruciatingly difficult to let go of some serious anger and resentment.

In the last few years, I was involved in an unsuccessful struggle against the plan to close down and sell off the university residential college part of Whitley College. Most of my struggle was to try to get those involved to publicly reveal and explain the reasons for the intended closure, because not only was that residential ministry being sacrificed, but it certainly wasn't obvious that there would be any benefit for the theological college. Fifteen months later, there still doesn't appear to be any benefit.

Now I can see that at times during that struggle, I was an obnoxious smartarse, and I tried to embarrass people into doing what they should have been doing. It is probably true that they thoroughly deserved it, but that doesn't justify my behaviour. But it is also true that my behaviour didn't justify theirs. They had a much bigger constituency that they owed answers to, and they hid behind closed doors and concealed everything from everyone. And by the end I was pretty bitter and twisted.

That residential college had been a significant ministry belonging to all our churches, and it was also a ministry that my wife had poured the last twelve years of her life into leading, and as far as I can tell, its closure was an act of sheer vandalism, aided and abetted by utter negligence. And a number of the key people involved were people I had respected, admired and counted as close friends and allies. But by the end, I felt utterly betrayed and shat all over by them. I still do.

So one of the things I carried into the desert with me last month was a large burden of pain and anger and resentment. I did not feel ready or able to love my enemies, to do good to those who brushed me aside or threatened me, to bless those who denounced me or criticised me, to pray for those who had trashed everything that Margie had spent those years building up. I wanted them held to account. I wanted them made to pay. I wanted retribution. I wanted to be vindicated.

And I actually still think that all those feelings are justified. In an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth world, that would be what should happen. But justified and ultimately desirable are not the same thing. I don't want to live in a perfectly eye for an eye world, because I'd very soon be blind. And Jesus calls me to let go of my thirst for retribution and instead to love my enemies.

But why? And what does all this mean? Is Jesus just taking an old law and replacing it with an even harder law? A virtually impossible law? Is this just a new set of rules that we can fail at and feel guilty about? If that's what it's about, then Jesus is not doing us any favours. That's not good news. That's making things worse.

But as I wrestled with this in the desert, I began to see the wisdom and the liberating power of what Jesus is saying. As I try to explain this, you might think you've heard it from me before and I didn't just learn this in the desert last month. And you'd be right, kind of. I have preached this before. But there is a difference between knowing it in my head to talk about it, and knowing it deep in my gut and finding a way to inhabit it in the context of my own personal hurts and resentments.

The first thing that I began to face up to was that the fight is over. Even if I kept fighting for people to be brought to account, not only would I probably continue to fail, but it can't bring the college back. It's already been sold and the bulldozers have gone in and torn it down. It's over. Not just in this case, but in so many situations, no amount of retribution can change the past or undo the damage. It's done. And if my resentment continues to fester, the only person who's really being burned by my resentment is me. The perpetrators got off scott free, and poisoning myself with bitterness is not going to hurt them, only me.

As Martin Luther King jr said, "Hate ... is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital centre of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective centre of your life. So Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated."

So I saw something of what my resentment was doing to me, and I heard the call to lay it down. I can't pretend I've left all that behind in the desert. It will keep welling up again from time to time, and I'll have to keep on steeling myself and laying it down again.

But that was only the beginning of what I had to wrestle with over this in the desert. I also began to see, deep in my own heart, how allowing these people to make me resentful and bitter and twisted is actually handing them control of my life, of the kind of person I become. If I let myself feel driven to retaliate every time I am attacked or insulted or disregarded, then all my enemies need to do to turn me into a nasty, violent and hateful person, is treat me in nasty, violent and hateful ways, and I'll do the rest of the job for them. I'm allowing them to define me, to determine who and what I will become. I'm handing them the keys to my life.

I think it was Martin Luther King again, or maybe Mahatma Gandhi or perhaps both, who said "I pray that nothing they ever do to me will be able to reduce me to hating them."

The logic of this is as simple as it is daunting. If I say I want to become a loving and merciful person, like Jesus, am I going to follow through on that goal only on the condition that everyone around me cooperates and makes it easy for me by being consistently loveable and nice to me? Or am I going to have the strength and resolve to forge ahead and follow in the footsteps of Jesus by developing an extravagant and indomitable love and mercy that can stay the course even if I am betrayed and humiliated and falsely accused and rejected and crucified? Will I allow other people's failures and falsehoods to map out my course, or will I break free of the tit for tat retribution game, and take my cues from Jesus, regardless of the actions of others?

And you know what? Here's the thing. The point where this goes way beyond being a tough personal challenge, and becomes really really good news for all of us together, is that this is actually about a whole new culture that is grounded in who God is, in what God is like. This is not just about a personal challenge to become more loving, but it is about what kind of world we want to live in, what kind of culture we are building and shaping as we follow Jesus together.

Jesus says that if we quit the tit for tat, and love our enemies, "we will be children of the Most High; for God is kind, extravagantly kind, even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful," he says, "just as God is merciful."

The choice is laid before me, before each one of us. Everyone of us has been lied to, abused, dismissed, ripped off. And we are perfectly justified in becoming the mirror image of that if we so choose. But we have also been recklessly and extravagantly loved and showered in generous mercy. Not by our neighbours, but by God. And the pathway of freedom and new life is to turn down the call to hate others as they have hated us, and to instead choose to follow the call to love our neighbours as we have been loved by God.

And that is the key to the life we all yearn to live. We long to live in a world that is not just an echo chamber of reciprocal hatreds, a world that is not shaped or manipulated by trolls and haters. We long to live in a world full of love and mercy that can't be defeated, that can't be shouted down, that can't be poisoned by bitterness. That world exists. It is the kingdom of God, the culture of God.

We can't even see it as long as we cling to our resentments, because we simply can't open ourselves to a love that we are not willing to see poured out lest it spill over those we want to see excluded from it.

But whether we see it or not, it is there, calling to us, inviting us to let go of our pain and come on it. It is there, fairly buzzing with the reckless generosity and mercy of the Most High who pours out loving kindness on absolutely everyone, even the ungrateful and the wicked. It is there: a culture of wild liberating love where all are set free to love more and more and more, and not even the most vile haters can stop them.

Don't fall for the defeatist false teaching that says these words from Jesus were not really for now, but are just a utopian dream of a future heaven. Jesus came proclaiming that the culture of heaven has drawn near, is even now at hand. God's new culture of reckless forgiveness and overflowing unstoppable love is right here, calling us to get on board. It's not exactly free. In the desert, I saw what it's going to cost me, and I suspect it is much the same for most of us. It is going to cost us our cherished resentments, our hostilities, our enmities. But what a bargain! Take my money and let me in!

When once we taste the love of God, broken open and poured out for us at this table, why would we settle for the mouldy crumbs of what we have carried too long. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, not because they deserve it, not because you like them or like the way they have behaved, but because you will no longer allow them to drag you away from the joyous party that is the culture of God, where love conquers all and sets us free to grow into all the love we were created and destined for.