

Luke 6:27-38 ²⁷ “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; ²⁸ bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ Instead, 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 himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ 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.”

Luke 6:27-38

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“The Courage to Be Counter-Cultural”

Pastor Amy Terhune

I’d like to begin today with a video clip featuring Kathy Bates as Evelyn Couch, the main character from book (and movie by the same name) called ‘Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe’ by Fannie Flagg.

Show Clip where Evelyn rams her car into a little Volkswagen Beetle.

View Clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akA8co61He4&t>

OR see end for a written description of the scene if you’re not able to watch it.

Now be honest, friends: How many of you were cheering for Evelyn as she rams that car? The scene is hilarious, but even more, there’s something about it that is so satisfying! For the first time in her life, Evelyn takes initiative, takes power, refuses to be the polite victim, and whether you’ve come to love her character, or you’re just now seeing this for the first time, you almost can’t help but to rejoice at her refusal to be a doormat.

But if we turn to our Scripture lesson from Matthew this morning, we might ask: would Jesus have ‘rejoiced’ over Evelyn’s actions? Might he not instead have suggested that she leave the car alone, park, go inside, and buy those two 20-something girls their groceries? We recoil at the very thought. And, if you are anything like me, we find ourselves saying: now wait a minute! Surely Jesus doesn’t want us to be doormats, to lay down and take abuse? Surely, he’s not advocating that we live as beings of low self-confidence and self-loathing? We celebrate that Jesus empowers us and makes us new creatures! Surely, he would have cheered with us? Surely, he would have had compassion for Evelyn and her circumstances?

Those are legitimate, thoughtful questions that need to be answered, but I can’t start there. We’ll get back to that shortly, so hang in there with me. First, the passage needs a bit of explanation and exposition. Without question, it’s one of the hardest, most counter-cultural, and most radical of Jesus’ teaching. It goes against human instinct and reason. If you think it can be rationalized and

explained away, you are in for an uncomfortable morning. The most dangerous thing the church can do is try to trivialize the teachings of Christ into what's comfortable and appealing and socially acceptable. Plenty don't take that danger seriously. I couldn't believe what preachers try to say about this text. Some argue it applies only to our personal lives, but not to politics or international relations. Others say the opposite – that it only applies to relations between political enemies but isn't practical for day-to-day living. Still others say it's hyperbole, in the same vein as Jesus' teaching on gauging out our eyes or cutting off our arms if these cause us to sin. But I don't see any evidence to read it that way. As best as I can tell, it applies to every relationship, and it applies to individuals and groups. We don't get out of this so easy.

But Jesus does tell us as our lesson opens this morning that his teaching is for those who are listening. He knew before he even opened his mouth that some would never hear him, never listen or internalize his teaching. Some would write it off out of hand, reflexively, instinctively – some would never have the courage to wrestle with the lesson or work for the kind of world Jesus is trying to build. Friends, if we trim this text into something wieldy, we're probably not wrestling with it faithfully. If it doesn't make us squirm a bit in our seats, we're probably not wholly engaging Jesus and who he calls us to be. And that's sad, because while this is challenging and difficult material, it also contains the seeds by which humankind might be empowered to truly remake the world with love. Throughout Epiphany season, I've been talking about courage – the courage to change routes, to speak unpopular truths, to be transformed, to go deep, and to be healed. I thought that the sermon title today would be "The Courage to Love Our Enemies" but as I really dug into this, it's not the loving enemies in and of itself that is at issue. It's the counter-cultural nature of the gospel. Today is about having the courage to go against everything society pushes us to do and be.

Do we have any Trekkies here today? Any Star Trek fans. I learned a bit of useless trivia this weekend. Did you know that the fictional Klingon language from *Star Trek* has no word for love? Of course, Klingons aren't exactly known for their warmth in the series, so apparently, the closest words for "love" in Klingon are "honor" or "unhate." This would all be fairly easy for us if we could define love simply as "unhating" others. Imagine if Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof" were to sing "Golda, do you love me?" And she sang back, "Well, I don't hate you." God doesn't let us define "love" that way, and God doesn't let us decide who is worthy of our love, either. [Original source unknown; as adapted from "By D Grace of God" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.

Now, I'm going to be honest here. I have enemies. There are nations that come to mind – Iran, China, North Korea, Russia – not that all the people of those nations are enemies, of course, but the nation state is. There are politicians that come to mind as enemies. And there are people in my personal life – people who have sought either to impugn my character and undermine my ministry OR people who have hurt my kids. I have feelings about all these enemies. Negative feelings. That's the honest-to-God truth. And in moments of weakness, I can still experience rage over things they've done to me, sometimes years ago, decades ago. But I learned long ago that my feelings are not always a good moral compass. I must check my feelings in prayer and devotion and in accountability relationships with others. I acknowledge my weakness; my sin. And ultimately, I must discern who God is calling me to be in the world. I have to acknowledge my feelings, wrestle with them, seek healthy outlets for dealing with them. But I do not have to let my feelings dictate my identity. I choose who I'm going to be in the world. I choose to submit myself to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

I appreciate what Charles Bayer writes about this, because he expresses the nuances so much better: "Jesus nowhere implies that Christians won't have enemies... I remember Jesus said, "Beware when all speak well of you." If I never do or say anything that is going to disturb bigots, racists, those

who trust in violence, those who live off injustice, the insensitive, the crude and rude, I may never have an enemy. But neither will I have been faithful to the gospel. Christians will have enemies...

"I am not afraid of being controversial – history is God's controversy with faithlessness. If Christianity implies being so neutral about everything that you never have an enemy to contend with, Jesus wasn't much of a Christian. While there is no virtue in going around making enemies, and while Christians should try and get along with everyone first, if we are faithful there will be those who try to silence us.

"How, then, are we supposed to love our enemies? Can we take a pill, or quote a verse or say a prayer which changes our hearts? If I do not love someone, can I twist myself around, convince myself that in fact I do love them? Can I banish, as if by sleight of hand, my negative attitude? If that is what it takes, I may get "A" for effort but "F" for performance. I can't make myself love those I detest, or who detest me. If you can, please share your secret.

"If I cannot feel differently, perhaps I can act differently, and the difference in how I act is the only way I will be able to change my mind. "Bless those who curse you," says Jesus. "Pray for those who abuse you ... To a person who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other ... And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them." The secret is in the doing. I may not be able to control my feelings, nor can I pretend to feel differently than I do. But I can control my actions. As I have told people in counseling: It is often easier to act your way into a new set of feelings, than it is to feel your way into a new set of actions. [4 ¶s from "Can We Really Love Our Enemies" by Charles H. Bayer, www.Sermons.com.]

If we speak truth to power; speak on behalf of the voiceless and the marginalized, we will make enemies. But we don't have to be cruel. We don't have to be mean-spirited. Yet there's more to all this than a simple question of character. Jesus calls us to love because this is the power of God.

Ghandi, who was not a Christian, was drawn to this particular teaching of Jesus, noting that when Jesus turns the other cheek, what he does in effect is hold the line. Jesus neither strikes back nor backs down. And that gets to the heart of the matter, bringing us back to the questions we began with: Surely Jesus doesn't want us to be doormats, to lay down and take abuse! Surely he's not advocating that we live as beings of low self-confidence and self-loathing! Clearly not. Quite the contrary. We celebrate that Jesus empowers us and makes us new creatures! And this is the pinnacle of it. Those who truly internalize and live out his teaching are empowered by the amazing love of God and refuse to act out of base instinct. Rather, we make an intentional, moral choice to speak and act out of self-giving, confident, empowering love.

Rev. Susan R. Andrews offers fascinating insight into these teachings of Jesus in a sermon entitled 'The Offense of Grace'. And by offense, she doesn't mean something offensive or insulting. She means 'offense' the ways sports teams talk about it. The job of the offense is to score, to lead the charge, to win points. The defense responds, tries to stop them, but the offense is the one with control of the ball or the puck or whatever it may be. The 'offense' of grace—that's a powerful image, and here's what she says: "Years ago I read a book about Christian assertiveness, and these puzzling words from Luke 6 were offered as guidelines for healthy assertive behavior. You see, to love our enemy is to take charge of the situation, to refrain from just reacting as a victim of their behavior. To love our enemy is to change the situation, to take the initiative to relate to our victimizers in a new way - literally to take the power out of their hands and to put it in ours in a positive way. To love the enemy does not mean to like the enemy. Instead, it means to understand them as human beings - troubled and sinful human beings who have hurt us because they themselves hurt inside. It means to make a decision to respond to them in ways which might benefit them and perhaps lead to healing. [adapted from "The Offense of Grace" by Susan R. Andrews, www.Sermons.com.]

If we truly live what we believe, chances are that we'll suffer for it, at least sometimes. If we truly live what we believe, chances are that we'll be ridiculed for it, at least sometimes. The early 20th century English author G.K. Chesterton once wrote: It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting; it's that it has been found difficult and not tried. And Rev. James Merritt notes that Christians had better be prepared to get less than they deserve, give more than they are asked, and go further than required. [From "Going the Second Mile" by James Merritt, www.Sermons.com.] If the Christian is concerned about their rights, consider that the greatest right we're given is the right to love like God does, and no matter how hard they may try, no one can take that right from us because that right lives within us, the divinely-inspired gift of taking complete authority over one's own life by submitting it to the love of God. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. Love without counting costs. Do good without regards to merit. Give without holding grudges or IOUs. It's not practical. It's not prudent. And it certainly won't prevent suffering. But it is visionary. It is Godly. It is redemptive. It is powerful. It will change the world. If we only have the courage to be counter-cultural. Amen.

A description of the video to start the sermon:

Evelyn Couch is a good, classy, southern lady and the main character in the book (and movie by the same title) called 'Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe' by Fannie Flagg. She doesn't get mad because it's not polite for a woman to get mad. Well, one hot Saturday afternoon, Evelyn is going to go grocery shopping. But of course, everybody and their brother is at the local Winn Dixie, so finding a parking spot is next to impossible. Finally, she spots a fellow who has just finished loading his trunk and is getting ready to leave. He sees her waiting for the spot, waves a friendly wave and hustles around to the driver's side to pull out so that she can have his parking space. "Thank-you!" she calls out in her polite southern way, and then she backs up a bit to give him more room to pull out. Well, he puts his car in reverse and pulls out of the spot, but before he put the car in drive and pull away, two young 20-something girls in a red hot VW bug whip around in front and snatch the parking spot. The fellow pulls away, shaking his head, but Evelyn is appalled. How rude!

"Excuse me," she says to the girls very politely. "I've been waiting for the spot."

"Yeah?" says one. "Well tough. Face it lady, we're younger and faster!" And they walk away laughing.

Well, I guess just one too many things haven't gone right for Evelyn Couch that week. Her husband is completely unavailable emotionally, her son will only give her dirty laundry to do, but never time and attention, her friends are into all sorts of whacky and out-there new age fads, and her only true confidant seems to be an elderly lady at a nursing home who will regale her with stories from long ago. And so something just snaps inside of Evelyn. Very calmly, she put the car into reverse, backs up a bit, puts it back in drive, hits the gas hard, and rams her big old Chevy into that little bug. Six times, she smashes into it, causing perhaps a few dents in her old boat of a car but doing serious damage to the tail of that bug. Well, the two 20-something girls come running back through the parking lot, crying.

"Are you crazy?" one of them screams.

To which she responds, "Face it girls, I'm older, and I've got more insurance."