

7 Epiphany
February 23, 2025

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

Sermon based on Luke 6:27-38

“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. “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.[a] 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. (Luke 6: 27-38)

TWO QUESTIONS

I’d like to begin by asking you to consider two questions. The first is this: What was your least favorite vegetable that you had to eat as a kid...and why? Why was it so bad? The second question is this: On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being high and 1 being low...politically speaking, how would you rate our nation’s state of well-being right now?

MARK TWAIN & JESUS

Today’s gospel reading is from Luke’s account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. It reminds me of something Mark Twain said, “The only way to keep your health is to eat what you don’t want, drink what you don’t like, and do what you’d rather not.” That pretty much sums it up regarding our physical health, doesn’t it? It also applies to today’s reading because in this sense: While the nutritional value of Jesus’ words may be high, like those vegetables, it doesn’t make them easy to swallow..

ASSUMPTIONS

I’d like us to look at this text through the lens of three assumptions. Now, some say it is foolish and even dangerous for us to think we know what others are thinking. (That doesn’t stop us though, does it?!) This is doubly true when it comes to us preachers assuming we know what Jesus was thinking! Yet we do it anyway. So, while Jesus could walk on water, with a text like the one before us today I feel like I’m treading on thin ice. Having said that, I’m going to proceed anyway!

ASSUMPTION #1: JESUS BELIEVED WE COULD DO WHAT HE’S ASKING

The first assumption is this: *Jesus wouldn’t have said these words if he didn’t believe his followers could do what he’s telling them to do....if he didn’t believe they (and we) were capable of it...if he didn’t believe it wasn’t in our power to do so.* One thing this tells us is that his very words were an act of believing in his followers. That includes you and me. It also says something foundational about us...about what we need to believe about ourselves: We are capable of loving our enemies. We can do

good to those who hate us. We have within us the power to bless those who curse us. Tragically, these are things few of us believe about ourselves. Frankly, sometimes it feels easier to hide behind our lack of faith in Jesus' beliefs about us rather than to believe them.

ASSUMPTION #2 JESUS BELIEVED WE ARE NOT BOUND TO THE WAYS OF THE WORLD

At one point in my life I joined a community choir. On our first night I paid my dues, was given a packet of music, and was handed a sheet of paper. On the paper was a list of twenty requirements I had to agree to if I wanted to sing in this choir. None of them were unreasonable or unrealistic but what got my attention was the heading at the top. It said, "THE WAY THINGS WORK."

Translating that thought into Jesus' words before us: Jesus believed we are not bound to the way things work here. We are not bound to the ways of the world. By extension, Jesus is also saying... neither are we bound by our egos, or our emotions, or our anger, our histories, our memories, our current situation or circumstances. In fact, according to the Bible, we are not even bound to God. That, too, is a choice. We simply are not bound...unless we choose to bind ourselves.

However, there is one thing we are bound to: Our thoughts. And that's the catch!

The movie, *The Long Game*, is based on a group of five high school boys who all worked as caddies at the nearby country club in Del Rio, Texas back in the 1950's. They would have loved to play on that course after hours but there was one problem. The country club was whites only. The boys were all Mexican Americans.

It's an engaging story of starts and stops and ups and downs that lead to a surprising ending. Along the way there's a moment when one of the coaches, played by actor Dennis Quaid, points out his finger out across the golf course and says to the boys, "The game isn't won out there." Then, pointing to his ears, he says, "It's won in here, in the 5 inches between your ears."

My point in sharing this story is this: Like those teenage boys, we are bound by what's in between our ears more than anything else. We are bound to our thoughts. We are bound by our thoughts because we believe them. After all, every belief started out as a thought and, like they say, first we create our beliefs and then our beliefs create us. No wonder Jesus spent so much time encouraging his followers to believe in themselves as he believed in them. No wonder he said things like, "You are the salt of the earth, a city on a hill, a lamp on a stand."

No, we are not bound to the ways of the word...but we are bound to our thoughts.

ASSUMPTION #3 JESUS BELIEVED THESE WORDS WERE EXACTLY WHAT HIS FOLLOWERS OF EVERY AGE NEED TO HEAR

The third assumption is this: Jesus believed that his words were exactly what his followers needed to hear. Judging by the crowds that followed him around, Jesus' message was highly relevant to their daily lives. But they weren't just appropriate then. These words of Jesus are exactly what you and I need to hear today. Why are they so valuable to us?

You've probably heard people...even preachers...say that Jesus turns our world upside down. Personally, I think that's bad theology. Jesus doesn't turn our world upside down. It already is upside down...which is the problem Jesus came to fix in the first place! All we have to do is take a good look at what's going on around us and we can see it. All we have to do is look at the ways of the world and we can see just how upside down it really is.

As an example, you noticed, I'm sure, right there in the middle of our gospel reading--after giving some very specific instructions about how to get along with each other--Jesus summed things up with a general easy-to-understand statement..."Do to others as you would have them do to you." In so doing he created the takeaway of all takeaways: The Golden Rule. But you know there's another version of the golden rule. It's one of the ways of the world and it goes like this: The one who has the gold makes the rules. Have we ever experienced a moment in history when this version was more true than right now? The world, my friends, is seriously upside down.

Or look at our nation. Democrats are saying this about Republicans. Republicans are saying that about Democrats. Both are convinced they are right yet neither is really listening to the other. The net result: Everyone loses. No wonder we scored so low in the survey I asked about our nation's state of wellbeing.

BELIEVING WHAT JESUS BELIEVED

Yes, it's hard. It's hard to believe what Jesus believes about each of us, and ironically, this is especially true when it's such good news! It's hard. Even Jesus wouldn't argue that point--even harder in times, perhaps like this one, when it seems God is distant, inattentive or unconcerned with our human plight and the overall state of the world.

Sister Teresa of Avila was a sixteenth century Carmelite nun who traveled throughout Spain working for monastic reform. There's a story told about her on one of her cross country trips while traveling between monasteries. After days and days of rain, her horse cart got stuck in the ruts now turned to rivers. She and her traveling companions got behind the cart and pushed. Eventually it broke free and lurched forward. At that moment she lost her balance and landed face down in the mud. She picked herself up, raised an angry fist to the sky and yelled, "God, if this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few!"

It's hard believing what Jesus believes about us. Life can seem challenging enough, barely manageable, even when God feels close. How much more so when God seems distant and life's stress and struggles seems ever so present!

It's hard believing what Jesus believes about us. You've probably heard the saying, "In a fight between you and the world, bet on the world." Well, there is a certain degree of truth to those words--truth that makes it difficult for us to believe Jesus.

WHAT JESUS BELIEVES ABOUT US

But let's stop and think deeply about his words. When we believe what Jesus believes about us--that we have the power within to do what he tells us...that we are not bound by the ways of the world...that his words are exactly what we need to hear...THEN WE CAN SEE SOMETHING OF THE WONDER AND MAJESTY OF GOD IN OURSELVES AND IN EACH OTHER...THEN WE CAN SEE WE ARE DEEPER THAN OUR DIVISIONS...THEN WE CAN EXPERIENCE AND WORK TOWARD THE STATE OF WELLBEING GOD INTENDS FOR ALL PEOPLE...AND THE EARTH ITSELF.

BY THE WAY

By the way, despite the racism, the prejudice and obstacles, the Mustangs--that group of five highschool boys in Del Rio, Texas--succeeded in becoming the 1957 Texas state champions.

Oh, and about those awful vegetables you had to eat as a kid...do you remember what your mother said when she served them? Two things... "They're good for you!" and, "YOU'LL LIVE!" And guess what? She was right. Again.

Amen.