

A Third Way

Luke 6:27-38; Luke 14:34-35

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, February 23, 2025

Luke: 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 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. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Beloved; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your God is merciful. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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 14:34-35:

“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is useful neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. If you have ears to hear, then hear!”

Jesus can be so aggravating! *“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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.”* Who wants to hear this at a time when so many of us feel like what we hold dear about this country, its people, and this planet are under threat? Or maybe there are other conflicts and challenges happening in our lives which have us on edge. In any case, many of us don't just feel like we are getting a slap in the face but more like getting pummeled day after day. Firings and funding cuts are leaving people and organizations afraid that they may not be able to afford a coat, literally or figuratively, let alone feel willing to give away the shirt they still have on their backs. And the dismantling of foreign aid is already being felt as a threat to the lives of countless millions of the most vulnerable in our world. Many of you have also told me that you fear that the foundations of democracy and legal protections are under threat. For so many of us, there is uncertainty about how to respond and how our faith can guide us right now.

In times like these, it can be easy to fall into the trap of either/or thinking. If we are to love our enemies and pray for those we feel are acting unjustly, does this mean that we are to be passive, to shut up and put up? Or, we may wonder, is our only possible response to fight back aggressively and, if so, what shape should this even take? Reading the scripture for today, I find myself wondering if there might be a third way between passivity and aggression, between acquiescing and violent reaction.

Let's consider for a moment the context in which Jesus spoke these words? Jesus' contemporaries were living under Roman occupation. If a Roman soldier, for example, were to hit someone, turning the other cheek could signify an act of non-violent resistance rather than simply acquiescing to being mistreated. It is what civil rights activists, black and white, did by remaining seated at the lunch counter while white supremacists hurled insults and fists. It was a way of saying: "Your hate does not define me, and I will not stoop to your level of aggression." It is as if Jesus was coaching people on how to act creatively, non-violently, counter-intuitively, and subversively.¹ We do not endorse what is happening, but insist that only love has the authority to define who and whose we all are. This third way calls us to widen the boundaries of how we envision what "community" means—finding the "common" human ground that gathers us amid our often serious and even heated differences.

Jesus also reminds us that we should treat others as we wish to be treated, a teaching shared in many cultures and religions. But there is another caveat. Jesus keeps saying that even your 'run of the mill' sinner can do all the 'basic stuff' of loving those who are easy to love, for example. Jesus is urging us to go further by guarding against profiting from another's misfortune. We will also fare better, he said, if we let go of a quid pro quo mindset of expecting things in return for

¹It was and is a way of standing up to an oppressor who would not be prepared for this kind of response. The same goes for offering your shirt also to someone who takes your coat. In Matthew 5:41, we similarly find the admonition: "...and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." A soldier could ask a local person to carry their pack for a mile. By adding another as an act of resistance, the person subversively does not submit to the oppression. However, I would also add that this is too much to expect from someone who is not in a stable and resourced enough position perhaps due to trauma or other reasons.

what we offer. Such care is to expand beyond those we already know and respect (Luke 6:32-33). Thanks a lot!

His comments also beg the question of what it means to sin. I tend to think of sin as a state of mind and heart in which we believe that we are separate from God and others. Out of this sense of separation flow actions which sever or burden relationships. We are all prone to getting caught up in such thinking and action. We have to keep finding ways to reconnect with a deeper knowing of our oneness in God—and, therefore, with each other. Jesus is really inviting us into a different consciousness around who and whose we are. We are all, in the midst of our differences, children of the one, living God, imbued with the one Spirit of God. We can lose touch with God's Spirit within us though it remains, even if hampered or dormant. We can also get caught up in refusing to believe that that same spirit is in those with whom we struggle who may be stuck and disconnected.

Poet David Whyte once commented on how amazingly compassionate his own mother, Mary O'Sullivan, was to everyone she met. When he asked her how she was able to stay so centered and open, she had this to say: "When you listen to someone's story long enough, they often take you back to the beginning of their life when this or that went a bit sideways, which explains why they would make such a bad choice. And when I know that part of their story, I always have compassion for them. So when I listen to someone, I just act like I already heard that part of their story."

Mary O'Sullivan was committed to keeping her heart open and imagining a different future. She also had the humility to know that "going sideways" could happen to all of us, leaving us all needful of God's mercy which actively undermines our tendency to separate ourselves from others. Her response reminds me of Jesus' line that "God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" from our text for today. Such kindness is not the same as condoning all behavior or never challenging it. I trust it leaves the door open for starting over again when we are lost. As Julian of Norwich wrote at the end of her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*: "the love wherein

God made us was in God from without beginning: in which love we have our beginning” (Ch 86). Which is to say that God is always offering us, all of us, a new beginning, inviting us to find a way to transform our death dealing and waywardness into resurrections.

In this same vein, Jesus urges us to keep showing up to life, and to take the risk to believe that resurrections are still possible among us. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus challenges us to have salt in us or, in Matthew’s remembering of the teaching, to know that we *are* the “salt of the earth.”² Salt has the power to preserve, to season, to disinfect and foster healing, to soften even, and to melt ice as we know so well. Writer Debie Thomas reflects that this metaphor of salt is a reminder that all our actions have an impact.³ We have to be aware that salt doesn’t exist to preserve itself but to preserve what we treasure for the common good. It is meant to enhance and not dominate, to heal and not to wound, to soften rather than destroy.⁴

I would like to tell a story which brings this creative and healing saltiness to life. If you were here on my Candidating Sunday in June, 2018, you heard it before. It is an ancient rabbinic tale that invites us into the same wisdom tradition which Jesus here voices: *It was the final meal of the Sabbath day, a holy day and a holy meal, and a number of devout men were gathered around Rabbi Wolf’s table.*⁵ *They revered the Rabbi as a righteous man, who sought to align his life with the will of God. Being at the Rabbi’s table was an honor that was not reserved for a particular crowd, though some guests inwardly felt it was so – or that it ought to be so. On this particular night, a man came whom others in the village regarded as ill-bred and ignorant. In fact, the men around the table made plenty of room for him because no one wanted to sit too close. The Rabbi, for his part, remained silent and closed his eyes. Hoping not to be disappointed, the guests remained quiet, still yearning for a teaching in due time. After a while, some began to wonder whether the great Rabbi had simply dozed off.*

² Salt has medicinal purposes. It was also used to forge covenants in ancient days (Lev 2:13).

³ In Richard Rohr’s *Daily Meditation Series*, “Why Salt Matters,” 12/31/24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This story is taken from the book *Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit & the Heart* edited by Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman.

Eventually, the man who bore himself rather clumsily, proceeded to take a large radish out of his pocket, cut it into bite size pieces and munched on them, making loud smacking noises as he unabashedly enjoyed this fruit of his harvest! The other men were watching him in growing disgust. Eventually, one of them could not restrain himself from speaking out: “How dare you offend this festive occasion and meal with your foul manners?” The man with the radish was so startled that he dropped it and blushed in quiet embarrassment.

Just then Rabbi Wolf stirred from his quiet repose and looked around the table. He fixed his gaze on the man with the radish and finally spoke: “I just feel like eating a really good radish tonight. I wonder if anyone here could get me one.” Now the man who had brought the radish beamed with joy. He reached into the pocket of his worn-out tunic and took out another radish. He cut it in half, reached right across the table over the food waiting to be eaten and offered a large piece to the teacher. The Rabbi smiled at him, sprinkled a little salt on the radish, bit into it with gusto and proceeded to make a raucous sound as he chewed, crunching the radish and smacking his lips. [And here I tossed and handed out some radishes].

I think of the Rabbi as finding a third way--and salty way-- to deal with a difficult situation. He did not want to see the man who was so judged and despised by others to be dishonored as a human being. He looked to the gift the man had brought and empowered him to share it, dignifying him in the process. The Rabbi also did not wish to throw out those caught up in their self-righteous judgments which disconnected them from the man who was struggling to fit in. Everyone kept their place at the table. Some had their lives seasoned with humility, the man with the radish got to taste the joy of feeling seen and called upon to share what he had.

What might it mean for us to have this kind of creative salt in us? While we cannot individually solve every issue, address every single challenge coming our way, we can “practice walking down the street heart first ... and being gentle with [our] own insufficiency,” as the poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer writes.⁶ This does mean that our hearts will feel the impact of

⁶ Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, *The Unfolding. Poems* (Wildhouse, 2024).

beauty, joy, fear, anger, and cruelty.⁷ Our hearts will have to speak their own truth, not in anger, judgment or derisiveness but in love. It means that we preserve, like good salt, faith in God's presence here and now in the thick of these challenges. We remind each other that God's love is just this tender and fierce at the same time.

While Mark and I will take our leave from this church community, we take heart in faith and joy, knowing that you will continue to live your witness to the radical love of God in this place. We know that you can all bring the best of who you are and what you offer to the shared table where everyone is welcome. You will continue to resist injustice creatively, together, and foster what is life-giving in this and in the wider community. You will network with others in 'committing random acts of kindness,' sharing abundance, strengthening bonds, shoring up hope, and risking connection. When you do so, Jesus said: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:38)." May we celebrate *this* bounty, and commit ourselves to *this* harvest, for everyone's sake. All thanks and praise be to God.

Benediction

Tomorrow belongs to those of us who can conceive of it as belonging to everyone, who lend the best of ourselves to it, and with joy. (Audre Lorde)

⁷ Ibid.