



COMPASSION
SEPTEMBER 22

Sunday, September 22, 2024

***Do Unto Others* Kindness Campaign: COMPASSION**

“Compassion: Turning the World Upside Down” | Luke 6:27-31 | Megan Berry

So, I want to start out today’s sermon with a little disclaimer. The scripture passage for today is a hard one to wrestle with, made especially harder because abusers have used this scripture to convince vulnerable people to stay in abusive situations. If you hear nothing else, please hear this: God does NOT want you to stay in an abusive situation in the name of love, or scripture, or because that’s what someone is telling you God wants. I deeply believe God desires for us to be safe and loved first, only then can we wrestle with difficult scripture.

With love and grace for ourselves and others, let us listen for what God has to say to us through scripture this morning.

“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.” -Luke 6:27-31 (NRSV)

Thanks be to God for these words of Scripture.

Now, I’m not going to lie, I love and hate the Golden Rule “treat others the way you want to be treated.” On one hand, it makes for an excellent children’s time, on the other, what sounds so simple and easy is actually really really difficult. But it really is the perfect summary and one-liner to remember all of what God does for us and what Jesus calls us to do as his followers. It’s the perfect thesis to God’s grace in the world. Because this Golden Rule reminds us that we are not meant to stoop to other people’s level. And beloved, that’s hard.

In a world where most things are transactional and there's a pervasive ethic of "you get what you deserve" often said in a threatening or manipulative way, the Golden Rule is the biggest uno reverse card God could play. God's grace and reminder of the Golden Rule takes the more threatening "you get what you deserve" mindset and tells us "what you deserve is love and compassion and grace" so go and treat others with love and compassion and grace. It completely turns upside down the thought process that we should only be nice to the people who are nice to us or only help the people who are willing to help us. Because that's not what God does or who God is. God's love and grace can't be bought, God doesn't have favorites, so we get called to this same ethic of love and compassion and grace that can't be bought, that doesn't have favorites, that embraces the Golden Rule.

And Jesus was very smart when giving this sermon, in case the Golden Rule and every other teaching wasn't enough for us to remember to embrace God's love and grace for ourselves and others, he starts off this teaching with all the hard parts of this command, to quite literally love our enemies.

If you're anything like me, this command "love your enemies" quite literally makes you bristle and physically cringe. What do you mean "love my enemies", sure I can pray for my enemies that they face consequences for their actions, sure I'll not wish complete ill-will on them, but LOVE them? That feels like **too much** to be asked to do. And at least for me, I think this is because my brain is equating love with liking someone and wanting to be around them.

Like I love my family and friends deeply. I care about their well-being and will absolutely go out of my way to love them well. And that's because I also **like** them. I want to be around them and want them in my life. And that is a different love from the compassionate love we're called to show everyone. The "like" love that we often think about is a love that comes with feelings of happiness or joy, a love that gives us that little dopamine kick when we're with those people.

The love that Jesus is calling us to with this phrase "love your enemies" is an actionable love, a love that doesn't require us to like the person and want to hang out with them, but a love that says "I may not like you, I may not want to hang out around you because we fundamentally disagree on X Y Z thing, but I'm not going to wish you harm. I'm not going to treat you poorly because you may have treated me poorly." It is a love that envelopes the Golden Rule in a way that helps us remember that we are to be kind and compassionate to EVERYONE simply because they are another human

being, not because they were kind and compassionate to us. What an easy calling, right?

This week, I watched the Pixar movie *Coco* for the first time. Beloved, it was a gorgeous and moving film, if you haven't watched it, I highly recommend it. And while I chose to watch it this week because it felt like a good next step in my personal grief journey right now, it also was surprisingly helpful for thinking about compassion in the world and loving our enemies.

You see, in this movie it follows the story of Miguel, who just wants to be a singer but isn't allowed to because his great-great grandpa left his great-great grandma Imelda and their daughter Coco to pursue his music career. And due to the pain that caused them, his great-great grandma Imelda banned music from the household and that ban stayed for many generations.

Fast forwarding through many twists and turns of the movie, Miguel's great-great grandpa is reunited with his wife Imelda as he's on an important mission. Upon reuniting, Miguel's great great grandpa apologizes to her for causing the family so much pain and tries to explain his actions to seek her forgiveness and help, but she's not ready to forgive him. And though she's not ready to forgive him, she still helps him. She even tells him "I can't forgive you, but I will help you."

And while we could quibble over whether she viewed him as an enemy or not, the power of that statement fits within this extremely hard command to love our enemies, practice compassion, treat others the way we want to be treated.

If great-great grandma Imelda had acted as most humans would want to react, she would have stayed in her pain and hurt and said "no, you hurt me. Good luck buddy!" or even worse "no, you hurt me and I want to hurt you back." But she didn't respond that way. Despite her pain and suffering, she didn't want him to suffer either, so she was honest with herself and with him "I don't forgive you, but I will help you." Such a powerful and hard statement to live into.

And now you might be thinking "great, but my life isn't a Pixar movie, what does this mean for me?" And I am so glad you asked!

As Charlie talked about last week, we are in the midst of a painful and difficult election season. And the political ads on TV are less than compassionate on all sides. So, in a

time when we're being fed so much discourse on how evil OTHERS are and what to do about it, I think it's extremely important to remember what God and Jesus call us to. How we're meant to treat others with grace and love and compassion, even when that feels so counterintuitive to what the world is doing around us.

And this won't be easy, it will be *exhausting* work, but thankfully God is there to help us remember to be compassionate and to help us when we lose our compassion. As much as I wish I could say "this is how you practice compassion without burnout" I don't have that magic fix. And I struggle to be compassionate when someone has deeply hurt me. So, something that I've been doing lately is turning to music as prayers to help me process my big feelings and fatigue.

When it comes to struggling with loving my enemies and embracing the Golden Rule, I will often listen to Kesha's song *Praying*. It is a heart-wrenchingly gorgeous piece of music about someone who deeply hurt Kesha and instead of embracing her inner Carrie Underwood and singing about slashing his tires or keying his car, Kesha instead says...

"I hope you're somewhere prayin', prayin'
I hope your soul is changin', changin'
I hope you find your peace
Falling on your knees, prayin'"

When I'm fatigued by compassion and struggling to live into loving my enemies, I try to listen to this song and pray this chorus, "I hope you're somewhere prayin' I hope your soul is changin'". I wonder what these lyrics, used as a prayer, might do for us this season?

And because I'm an educator at heart, I have some more questions for you to ponder this week. Who are the folks you see suffering around you? How could you join them in their suffering and work to remove that suffering from their lives? How might compassion and the Golden Rule help you re-think some of the rhetoric you're hearing about the world we live in?

And don't worry, this isn't a pop quiz, I'm not going to ask for a written report on how you'll be compassionate this week. But I think it's worth taking some time and space to really ponder this for yourself and to talk with God about this. These are big asks that God is calling us to, and thankfully God doesn't call us alone. God calls us in

community and sits with us through hard times. God also gives us tools for when compassion becomes hard, because compassion fatigue is super real.

So, I want to close with a blessing from Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie's book *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. This blessing is called "for when loving your enemy seems too big of an ask" pretty fitting huh. Let us pray...

"For when loving your enemy seems too big of an ask" - Kate Bowler

Lord, this anger feels so right, so just, that loving my enemy is inconceivable. Am I even allowed to have an enemy? Well, too bad. I do. (and way more than one.)

God, I don't want to, but help me see what I need to see, so I can do what I know I'm supposed to do.

Blessed are we who recognize that the divide is deep and the enmity strong. We are attached now to our hostilities – not only as symbols of who we are, but also by the values and principles that we uphold.

Blessed are we who ask you, God: Help us to be faithful to your call to love our enemies, for your name's sake and for ours too. Yet we ask, How is that possible? We desire no false peace, no imitation grace.

Where do we begin? How do we recover civility? Build unity? Work together and yet hold on to our integrity?

Show us precisely how to love those whom we have so lately despised. Not just humanity in general, but these humans, in particular.

Blessed are we who say, Oh God, Please do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Give us the desire to speak the truth in love, to listen to each other and hear the humanity underneath the hurt. Give us the wisdom and skills to communicate well and patience that can bear up when things get difficult. And where we ourselves fall short, stand in the gap for us, Lord, just as you did at the cross.

Pray for one enemy. Do them some small good. Then, let it go. Amen.