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Love your enemies?  
Martin Grove United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 5:38-48

I wonder how Jesus felt while he was teaching the lessons we now call the “sermon on the mount”? This is our third week looking at that text, and the message seems to be getting harder and harder to understand. Not that we don’t understand the words themselves, but harder to understand why people stayed to listen. Why would people stay to hear such challenging words? I’m pretty sure if I’d been there to hear the sermon on the mount, I would have found some excuse to slink away. I would certainly have left during today’s piece of the sermon, which I consider the most radical and provocative words in the entire Bible. We’ve been through the part about feeling blessed, we’ve been through the directives to deal with our own anger, or in fact deal with any negative emotions that we carry around. But today’s piece of the teaching goes much farther. I can’t read the words without wondering if Jesus was trying to get people to leave before he had to feed them!

For example, Jesus says, “if someone strikes your cheek, turn, and offer the other cheek.” Is Jesus serious here? If someone hits me, should I simply offer a different body part for abuse? Is Jesus really encouraging us to be victims? And what about this one, “Give to everyone who begs from you.” Really? Has Jesus ever been to downtown Toronto? Does Jesus know how many beggars there are? Moreover, aren't we supposed to encourage beggars to find other funding sources - like work. Is Jesus really suggesting that we should enable poor people to stay poor? Hasn't Jesus heard that line - “give a person a fish and you feed them for 1 day, teach a person to fish, and you feed them for their whole lives”. Didn't Jesus understand that principle? Doesn't Jesus believe in “tough love”? Perhaps Steve’s story fits here.

I had a phone call recently from a person I’ll call, “Steve”. Steve is a jeweller who is between jobs. At the time he called me, he said he had found a job that would start in 1 week. Steve just needed to find a way to cover the 1 week interval before his

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next job started. Oh, and of course he needed bus fare to get to his new job - 2 weeks worth actually because once he started working he would not get paid for 2 more weeks. And he needed food. So really, he needed 3 weeks of financial support. But if Steve could just survive that 3-week period, his new job would have started, he'd have been paid, he'd have saved up a bit of money, and Steve would have started to get his life back on track. Who could say "no" to that opportunity - an opportunity to help an unlucky but hard-working fellow get back on his feet?

With the words of Jesus ringing in my ears - "give to anyone who begs from you", - I calmly told Steve that I really could not help him with any money. Why did I refuse to help Steve? Well, to make a long story short, I met Steve about 5 years ago in Scarborough, and again about 3 years ago in Mimico, and I was treated to his voice over the phone once since I've come to Rexdale. And his story is always exactly the same. When he calls, he is always 1 week away from his next job. And as always, I tell him that I have no money for him, but that if he wants to chat I will buy him lunch and give him some of my time. I've only eaten with Steve once.

Did I do the right thing? Can I justify myself by saying that I didn't want to enable Steve? When I decided that instead of a good job offer, Steve just had a good story, was I being discerning and loving? Or was I just being selfish? If Jesus had answered the phone instead of me - would the story have had a different ending? If only Jesus had qualified his bold statement "give to any who ask" - and I can suggest lots of qualifiers: "give to any who are worthy", "give to any who actually have a real job offer in their future". Or - as we regularly hear on the streets - "give to any if they are not wasting their money on cigarettes or alcohol". No such luck. Jesus simply says, "give to any who ask". Full stop. These are very challenging words.

Or consider this one: "If someone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two miles." Scholars believe that in Jesus's day, Romans could force indigenous people to carry their baggage for 1 mile. It was understood by all - 1 mile. Jesus is saying that if a Roman official forces you to join them for 1 mile, that you should join them for 2 miles. Does that sound realistic to you? Perhaps Luke's story fits here.

Luke was arrested for public mischief and put into a state prison. I'm not just sure

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what year it was, but this was back when American prisons still used inmates as road work crews. The days were long, the work was tough. But like all humans, Luke became accustomed to his surrounding, to the work routine and to life in prison. Every morning the “bosses” would herd the inmates onto trucks and take them out to a piece of road, and give them their assigned duty for the day. But one day, “Boss Paul” gave the crew a very demanding task - the crew were given a whole road to tar. This was manual work of course, a very physically demanding job, which was assigned as a punishment. But Luke convinces his fellow inmates that they should put a lot of energy into the task, and to finish the job ahead of schedule. And they do. The inmates finish taring the road about 2 hours ahead of schedule. Why did they do it? Partly, they wanted to prove to the guards that they still had some independence, that they could still make decisions. But of course, the main reason they did it was to prove their independence to themselves!

The inmates were forced to re-tar a road, so they did it well, and fast. That’s going the extra mile. That story from the 1967 movie “Cool Hand Luke” is a modern version of Jesus’s statement that we should go the extra mile when we are forced to go one mile. Is this just bravado? Is this just trying to exert personal agency in a situation that is highly controlled? Is this just a more elaborate version of that phrase popularized in movies - “You can’t fire me - I quit!”?

Jesus’s command to “go the extra mile” still strikes us as odd, however. Why should we help our enemies? And if we are forced by local law to help our enemies, why - other than bravado - should we do more than the absolute minimum?

And here’s where Jesus gets his most radical. Even before we have finished digesting “help your enemies”, Jesus tells us to love our enemies. What does that even mean? I was raised to think that the word “enemy” meant someone that you hate. How can you love them?

*[love your enemies - what does that mean?]*

*[enemy is someone who hates you!]*

Believe it or not, I believe that sermons should always include a certain amount of

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hope. And yet, I've been talking about our gospel reading in a way that probably sounds fairly hope-less. However, I think that the seeds of that hope are also found within our reading today. Jesus didn't just say "love your enemies". He said - at least in Matthew's version - "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you". That extra piece - "pray for those who persecute you" is where I find hope in all this.

How many of us pray for those who persecute us? Well, perhaps the word "persecute" is a bit over the top. How about - how many of us pray for our enemies, or at least pray for people we don't like? If you have never tried praying for your enemies, 2017 is a great year for you. I will quote from the website [ministrymatters.com](http://ministrymatters.com), "On Friday January 20, Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States. God's word directs Jesus followers to pray for all of our leaders - and certainly that includes President Trump - his health, his heart, his family and a peaceful transition into the presidency. Yet after such a contentious election cycle and amidst continuing, bitter divides, many may be struggling with where and how to begin their prayers - especially those who may have voted differently or consider themselves in opposition to Mr. Trump's platform, nominees or campaign promises."<sup>1</sup>

The trick, of course, is to pray for enemies as if we loved them. In other words, when you pray for them, do not pray that they will become the person *you* want them to be. Pray for them as you pray for those you love. Wish them peace. Wish them joy. Pray that they will truly feel the peace of God in their lives.

And if we pray for enemies as if we loved them, over time, we just might come to actually love them. We can learn to love our enemies.

*Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/7947/praying-for-the-president?spMailingID=173533&spUserID=Mzk4NTgzNDI5S0&spJobID=220177581&spReportId=MjIwMTc3NTgxS0>