

February 24, 2019, "Love Your Enemy", Rev. Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson

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Psalm 37:1-7a

Don't get upset over evildoers;

    don't be jealous of those who do wrong,  
    because they will fade fast, like grass;  
    they will wither like green vegetables.

Trust the Lord and do good;

    live in the land, and farm faithfulness.

Enjoy the Lord,

    and God will give what your heart asks.

Commit your way to the Lord!

    Trust God! God will act  
    and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,  
    your justice like high noon.

Be still before God,

    and wait for the Lord.

Luke 6:27-36 Common English Bible (CEB)

"But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and do not demand your things back from those who take them. Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.

"If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for God is kind to ungrateful and wicked people. Be compassionate just as your Heavenly Parent is compassionate.

Before we begin, I want to give credit where credit is due, the story I tell this morning is not mine -- it was told by Reverend Randall Robinson on the podcast RISK. I've taken some liberties to make it my own.

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You're not supposed to have favorite kids at camp, but I've been watching Elizabeth all week. We haven't had much opportunity to interact, but I've been watching her.

You see, Elizabeth is one of the smaller kids at camp this week, and she is one of a special group of campers – about a dozen total – who come to us from child protective services and foster care. Most of the kids from this group show up with nothing more than the clothes on their backs – so the camp provides everything else they need for the week – clothes, toothbrush, sleeping bag, flashlight, shoes, a rain coat, bathing suit, the whole lot. I don't know Elizabeth's story or what she's experienced in her short life, but the burn marks on her arms are easily identifiable, and I assume that these visible marks of harm are a far cry from the only abuse she's experienced.

The other reason I've been watching Elizabeth this week is because she's ended up with a less-than-ideal cabin counselor. I'll just call her Jane. I get that some folks are ignorant or maybe even mean-spirited, but Jane – well, let's just say that it's more than ignorance or mean-spiritedness. I've heard Jane's off-hand comments to the tune of "why do those children have to be here?" and I know Elizabeth has heard them, too. I've watched Jane's body language towards Elizabeth and the methodical way that she cuts Elizabeth out of conversations or intimate cabin-group moments.

On Tuesday, the camp director even had to go down and intervene between Elizabeth and Jane. I guess the kids in the cabin had been playing with their flashlights and Jane told them to knock it off, and they didn't. Well guess which ONE kid got her flashlight taken away? Yep – Elizabeth. Elizabeth has other counselors who are great, but she's also got Jane.

Anyway, it's Thursday evening – a special night for us at camp when we do foot-washing with the kids. Just as I'm getting a fresh bucket of water, Elizabeth takes a seat on the chair in front of me. She's small for nine, and her toes just dip into the basin of water below her. Slowly and gently, I cup water over her feet and ankles, and I wash them clean. As I hand her the towel, I look into her solemn eyes and speak the words that I've said to every other child I've washed, "Elizabeth, Jesus loves you." She says nothing but simply dries her feet, gets up and walks away.

Just as I finish washing the next child's feet, I feel a tap on my shoulder. Elizabeth, her shoes back on, is standing next to me. "Excuse me," she says softly, "I'd like to wash feet."

I'm taken aback. I've done this foot washing many times and never had a camper ask to do it. I feel the need to explain it to her: "Elizabeth we're washing feet because Jesus did that for his disciples, and it makes everybody equal. Nobody's better than anybody else. We all help each other. You get that, right?" Elizabeth nods seriously. "You see how we do it? You wash the person's feet, and as you give them the towel, you tell them that Jesus loves them. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes, I can do that." As I look at this little girl, I feel a little silly asking. Clearly, she gets it.

“Okay.” I step aside and help Elizabeth get in place ready for the next person’s feet. Once she’s washed a couple people’s feet, I feel confident leaving her on her own, so I wander around the hall a little bit visiting with counselors and kids.

That is until I notice the looks – from kids and adults alike – directed back towards the foot-washing station. Towards Elizabeth. I look back and notice who’s next in Elizabeth’s line. Any guesses? Yep! Jane! This woman who has been so hateful to this little girl, who has been her tormentor, her enemy, for four days is going to sit down in that chair and have Elizabeth wash her feet.

I watch as Jane sits down in front of Elizabeth and puts her feet in the water. I watch as Elizabeth carefully and gently cups water onto Jane’s ankles. I watch as Elizabeth touches Jane’s feet, washing them clean. Then she reaches for a towel, looks up into the woman’s face and says simply “Jesus loves you.” Jane says nothing, dries her feet, gets up and walks away.

“But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and do not demand your things back from those who take them. Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.”

Today’s scripture reading from Luke is hard. Its instructions are difficult not only to follow, but even to swallow.

And we have to be careful as we read this scripture -- we have to be careful not to interpret it as saying that we should be a doormat, passive and powerless, that we should simply take others’ mistreatment and abuse. We have to be careful that we do not interpret it as saying that we should be boundaryless and put up with, enable or even encourage cruel or violent behavior. Let me say right now that I do not believe this passage is telling us to stay in harmful or abusive

relationships. It does not call us to approach life passively, to relinquish our power and simply take what life brings.

Instead it is calling us to act in the deepest and most powerful sense -- to stand fully engaged, rooted and grounded in love. Not a mushy, sentimental love, but the love expressed in the Greek word agape, which means understanding, a redeeming goodwill for others, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote agape "is the love of God working in the lives of [human beings]. When we love on the agape level, we love [others] not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them.

This is love -- not the love of passive powerless resistance, not that enables wrong-doing or even encourages it, not that allows itself to be used and abused -- none of that is truly love. This is love that can move mountains, love that can transform an enemy into a friend. Love, and we know that it is only love, that has the power to defeat hatred. This love shines a light in darkness and darkness will not overcome it.

This love was central to the non-violent resistance of many Civil Rights Activists. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr took Mahatma Gandhi's teachings on nonviolent resistance and put them into practice himself. Dr King says this of nonviolent resistance -- and all of this is true about the kind of love that Jesus is teaching his followers.

This love is not for cowards, for it does resist. Although a person's body may seem passive or at least non-aggressive, that person's mind and emotions are always active and engaged, always looking for an opportunity to demonstrate to another person the power of the way of love. This love does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent but instead to win their friendship and understanding. The goal of such love is always redemption, reconciliation and the creation of beloved community. This kind of love resists and opposes evil instead of seeking

to defeat the persons victimized by evil. This love avoids not only external physical violence but internal violence of the spirit.

This is agape love -- which, to use Dr. King's words, means understanding and redeeming good will for all people, an overflowing of love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of human beings. When we love on the agape level, we love people not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us, but because God loves them.

This agape love is manifest in a little girl who quietly and calmly washes the feet of an adult who has been repeatedly unkind to her. And whether or not Elizabeth's actions changed Jane's heart, we know that there were others in the room that day who saw and felt the power of this love. There were others in that room that day who knew that only through God can such healing and reconciliation occur.

Friends, this is no easy task -- to love in the face of hatred, brutality, ignorance, and fear. Our Christian faith demands nothing so difficult of us. And yet, we know that we are not alone in this work. We know that only through God can we love like this. We know that trusting God and channeling God's agape love takes practice. And we also know the immense power of this kind of love. We know the promise for us and our world of loving this kind of love: of reconciliation and redemption.

Where in the the world, where in this community, where in your life, is this agape love needed? May each of us trust in God's leading and practice this radical love. Amen.