

## **"Sporting the Black Eye of the Heart"**

**Luke 6:27-38**

**February 24, 2019**

*Jesus has a habit of saying what he expects of us as his followers. And we try. We really try. But some people get the best of us and despite our best intentions, we take their bait and off we go, fighting with them again. It gets ugly. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and that's all well and good, but how do we protect our hearts from the black eye of their emotional assault? Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in Luke's Gospel, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, beginning with the 27<sup>th</sup> verse:*

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

"Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them*! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

"I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.

"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are

down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity."

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

Saturday, September 26, 2015 was a glorious day. If you were a member or steady friend of this church back then, there's a better than even chance you were here that afternoon. For at least two members of our church, they will always remember and cherish it.

But back up three days to September 23rd, and there was another memorable event, at least in my life. That was the day I chose to pick a fight with a gutter outside my sister's new apartment; I lost that fight, by the way, and it gave a whole new meaning to Jesus' teaching to "turn the other cheek."

As I recall, I was walking in single file between my sister and Chris. We were there to check out her new apartment complex. It was right behind Aspen Grove outdoor mall. I remember the day was sunny and bright, still providing that late summer/early fall warmth that Colorado is famous for.

A couple of days before that, Chris had been in the hospital with severe dehydration. While walking, I was paying close attention to how he was doing. I was paying close attention to him and not close enough

attention to where my feet were going. There was a depression in the sidewalk, and I hit it just as I was looking back to check on Chris.

Wham! Bam! Down I went, right into the gutter, a direct hit on the left side of my face. I had no time to try to break my fall with my hands or my knees. I took the full impact directly to my cheek. I knew instantly I was hurt pretty bad. My eye was already swollen shut and I was bleeding from under it down through my cheek.

Gingerly, I felt around the affected area, relieved to not find any glass or pebbles imbedded therein. And then it hit me...." Oh, no! Saturday. What am I going to do?" I had no idea how bad I looked until I got to the Emergency Room. And how I looked that day was no match for how I looked the next day, Thursday. I made a phone call and offered to find a substitute for Saturday's event.

I don't recommend picking a fight with a concrete gutter, by the way. It's not a fair contest. It seems today that there are many gutters calling out to us to come give challenge; many immovable objects just waiting to take us down, eager to humble us and make us feel pain.

Jesus said to the people, "To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst." I'll bet if I ask you right now, you could reel off a whole list of enemies. From politicians to family members to former business associates to unknown threats living in foreign countries, to people of other religious

traditions, to politicians—did I mention them? It's easy to name our adversaries.

It's easy to name them, but what are we to do with them? They seem like the gutters of life. We meet them with our best face, and blam! they batter and bruise us unmercifully.

Some of us write letters. Some of us post verbal salvos against them on FaceBook. Some of us complain in safe spaces. Some of us show up to protest. Most of us do nothing overt to meet them, preferring to suffer in silence and hoping for a better outcome next time.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." We dream of peace; we talk about it out loud in communal prayers spoken over cups of Starbucks and in the "war rooms" of our family homes. We hear it spoken in the rhetoric of those paid to say profound things, and we read about it in our sacred text, the Bible. We dream of peace, but at the expense of our enemies.

Jesus says to go love up the enemy. Hmmm. Easier said than done, methinks. Ok, let's try a little experiment. Close your eyes and think of an enemy of yours. Got yours? Try telling that person you love them as God loves all of us. Try smiling at them, reaching a handshake or a hug toward them, saying something positive about them, something all sweet and gooey and...Christian-like.

Impossible! Not happening! No way! I'd rather kiss a hoary boar who's been rolling around in his own manure than approach my arch-enemy and pass the peace with them.

A terrific book was written several years ago and distributed by the Arbinger Institute, a foundation dedicated to helping people meet across difference and division. In *The Anatomy of Peace*, a Palestinian and a Jew help American parents in conflict with their troubled teens learn how to engage in peaceful thought and language. I highly recommend this book for anyone who deals in the world or life of conflict.

It is part of the anatomy of personal war that,

...when I betray myself, others' faults become immediately inflated in my heart and mind. I begin to 'horribilize' others. That is, I begin to make them out to be worse than they really are. And I do this because the worse they are, the more justified I feel... A heart at war needs enemies to justify its warring. It needs enemies and mistreatment more than it wants peace...

One way we do this is by lumping others into lifeless categories—bigoted whites, for example, lazy blacks, crass Americans, arrogant Europeans, violent Arabs, manipulative Jews, and so on. When we do this, we make masses of unknown people into objects and many of them into our enemies.

Or, taking my story as the metaphor for this lesson: when we choose to do battle with the immovable gutter, we are the ones who suffer the

injury and we are the ones who get the black and swollen eye we can no longer see out of.

Jesus tells us, "Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them!* If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back?"

Respect seems to be in short supply these days. A billionaire football team owner has no respect for women forced into prostitution and slavery. A television star has no respect for the truth, staging a racial and homophobic attack in protest over his salary and for the advancement of his career.

But not all the news is bad. On the *Pass It On* website, there are stories upon stories of ordinary people living out Jesus' admonition to, "Live out this God-created identity the way our Creator lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our God is kind; you be kind."

Katrina Sue wrote this about an encounter she had in her Jr. High School:

I will always remember this one girl that was in all of my 7th grade classes. She was very quiet, never back-talked anyone, always greeted the staff at our school, never interrupted the teachers like any other kid in the school. All my friends thought she was just weird, but I watched her for a while and she was always so polite. All the kids at my school were always rude not listening to the staff, so one day, the day I will always remember, I finally had the guts to ask her why she

wasn't like the rest of us and what she told me changed the way I acted. When I asked her, she told me, "If you ever want to be respected in life, you'll have to respect others and by others, I mean not just your friends."

After she said that I started respecting others more and telling other people what I was told.

Here's another short story from the same source, this one written by

Johnnie Prater:

About a year after my mother died, a teacher questioned me about who she was. When I finally gave her enough information to identify my mother, the teacher said " Oh! You mean that "kind" woman! " I thought "what a great commentary on a person's life," and resolved to try to live so that could be said about me. Through a lifetime of working with disadvantaged people, I have come to believe kindness may be the most important quality of all.

Kindness. Respect. Turning the other cheek. Christian values, yes, but they are also some of the hardest to practice. It seems in America we have lost the art of public kindness. We have ditched the lending of respect in favor of the rhetoric of war, all-out political and personal war.

Jesus faced the same kind of opposition, the same concrete gutter-immovable object religious and political system we have today. Where do we start? We start with one person, *one person*. "We seek peace," as Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "knowing that peace is the climate of

freedom." When we seek peace, we free ourselves, we heal ourselves. We begin to absorb and mend the black eye of our heart.

Jesus might have said it like this: "Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity."

We have to heal ourselves, folks. This war of the soul we cannot win. If we give up our internal war, we find life and healing. If we harbor it and feed it, it will chew us up and have us die embittered, embattled, peace-less, and regretting our lives.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed for his message of peace, but his message did not die. He said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Jesus was killed for his message of love, but his love did not die. We will all die one day; do we want our legacy to be that of peace and love, or hate and resentment?

My September 2015th fight with the gutter ended poorly for me, but Bill and Gary were so wonderful about it all. When I offered to step aside from officiating their wedding because of how awful I looked, they said "Nonsense. We don't want someone else. We want your heart. We want you." A bit of makeup and a little trick of wearing my glasses to cover most of the bruising, and most people were none the wiser to my plight.

The wedding was inspirational; the grooms were simply marvelous in their black tuxes, red ties, and dashing smiles. Love was all around. Respect was in this House. Peace was the order of the day. I wouldn't have missed it for the world, and because they were so gracious, I didn't have to.

Love defeats hate. Light defeats darkness. Peace begets freedom. Jesus inspires transformation. We have time, people of God; we still have time.

*May It Be So.*