

“Overriding Common Values”

Based on Luke 6:27-38

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Last week we heard the start of Jesus’s sermon that he gave, not from the mountaintop as portrayed in Matthew but on flat land, a plain, where he stood on a level place surrounded by people who wanted to hear what he had to say. Jesus began his sermon by flipping the script on who we typically identified as who are the blessed and who are suffering woe. Jesus said that the poor are blessed but woe to the rich. The poor are blessed because the kingdom of God is theirs and they will receive some day all the richness and bounty of the kingdom of God. But for the rich, they receive their blessings now. In the future they will go without. This may sound like the rich have no hope for the future. But Jesus explained what he meant through the story about Lazarus and the rich man. It was the hardness of heart and failure to share that led the rich man to suffer in hell. Jesus gives good news to the poor. But he reminds the rich that the blessings they have now won’t last. They have a responsibility, as declared by the prophets for generations, to share what they have with those who are in need. And the rich can do this with confidence that they will receive even more in the age to come. Whatever they give now will be returned to them, shaken, pressed down and overflowing.

Today we hear a continuation of Jesus’ sermon. Jesus is still flipping the script. Speaking the message of the great prophets of old, Jesus calls all who would hear to practice values that are different from the common shared values of society, both theirs in the time of Jesus and in our own. Jesus is proclaiming kingdom values instead of common values. They are values that turn things upside down, that beckon us to a way of relating to each other that is radical, vulnerable, transformational. You have heard that the mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. To the extent that we as disciples live out what our master teacher Jesus is

sharing with us...that would truly transform the world. What are our common values that Jesus overrides with kingdom values?

One common value is reciprocity. This is the basis of our economic life. I offer you my services and in return you affirm me and I get a paycheck so I can pay the businesses who offer me and my family services such as electricity, water and wi-fi. A mutual exchange of goods is based on reciprocity. Contracts are set up on reciprocity: I commit to these things and you likewise commit to these things for our mutual benefit. Reciprocity is a critical value to a just society. It is unjust if some people always give and never get anything back or people only take and never give. Reciprocity, give and take, is the basis of fairness. Surely Jesus has no problem with this value.

But Jesus challenges us to adopt a value that does not depend on reciprocity. He says, for example, that we are to give without expecting anything in return, not even a thank you. We give and the response of the one who receives is irrelevant. We give just because we can and there is a need. Jesus teaches us not to lend anything. Rather, we are to give when people ask us and not expect to get it back. We don't lend. We give.

It's kind of amusing when you are sitting in a meeting and someone says to you, "Can I borrow a piece of paper?" Are they really going to give the paper back to you? Of course not. So you say, "You can just have it." I've collected a few pens along the way too by asking someone if I can borrow their pen and they say, "You can keep it, I have another one."

But then there was a time I asked a church member if I could borrow one of his saws to cut some wood. He said, "Sure" and let me borrow a nice saw. I cut my wood, hung the saw up in my garage and there it stayed for months! I totally forgot to give it back to him! Finally, I noticed it hanging there and, apologetically, took the saw back to him. He said to me, "Keep it, I just bought myself another one." I don't know if he gave me his saw not expecting to get it back, but he didn't ask for it back. He just got himself another one. He was putting a kingdom value to work.

I think the bigger issue here is that Jesus doesn't want anything to block us from giving what we can to those in need. He doesn't want us to calculate if we are going to get paid back or gain some other advantage. If someone is in need, and you have the capacity to give, then just give without thought about whether you will get paid back or benefit in any other way.

Another common value our society holds is getting even. Another word for it is restitution. If you break a window, you pay for it. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Getting even is all about making things right. I know that in many cases, we just let things go. Sometimes we just want to forgive the person who wronged us and move on. Say it's late in the afternoon and you are trying to get home after a long day at work. You are stuck in traffic. You get distracted and accidentally roll forward and bump into the car in front of you. You and the person in the car you ran in to steps out and you both take a look. There's a little dent there but, everyone is trying to get home and cars are all lined up behind you. The person whose car you just dented looks at you and says, "Forget it, no big deal." You thank them and then get back in your car and make your way home grateful that you were forgiven and didn't have to go through the hassle of making things right. Now, I'm sure if there wasn't a lot of traffic, or the damage was more severe, that would be a different story. Rightly, the other person would want you to make things right. They deserve to get even with you.

Jesus tells us not to get even. Instead, we are taught to forgive others when we are wronged, and that's it. No demands for restitution. No attempts to get even. Simply forgive. What the person you forgive does in response is up to them. No conditions to your forgiveness. They don't have to make things right and then you forgive. You just forgive. Now it's likely whoever harmed you will want to make things right. Then again, they may not. And that would be a bummer. But you forgive anyway. After all, you and I need forgiven ourselves from time to time. It's nice to be forgiven. Jesus said if we forgive then we will be forgiven. We pray here every Sunday, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." When Jesus was on the cross, he asked God to forgive those who put him there. They didn't have to

repent first. They didn't have to make things right first. Jesus forgave first.

There's another common value in our society, which is to love our friends and family and hate your enemy. That goes without saying. It's completely natural. How can you have anything other than hate toward your enemy, toward someone who does everything they can to destroy your life, maybe even take your life. The enemy directly threatens your safety and security. For survival, your enemy has to be stopped, deterred, perhaps even eliminated. Hate seems to be the natural posture toward someone who threatens your survival or the survival of your family and friends. Especially if they have killed someone in your family or some of your friends. Hatred is the only adequate response towards people like that.

Why did Jesus have to say that? Why did he have to give us this hard teaching to love our enemies? This pushes us to wonder what Jesus means by "love." There is no way that Jesus means we are to have the same feelings toward enemies as we have towards our family and friends. That is just not going to happen. So love must mean more than a feeling. I wonder what Jesus means by love?

I think we can agree that Jesus does not associate love with affection or warm feelings. Maybe what Jesus means by love is to desire for the well-being of the other and doing what you can for the well-being of the other. What would it mean to desire the well-being of your enemy? How would that impact what you do to your enemy that will provide for their well-being?

Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews were at odds with each other. This was a generational disagreement. Samaritans and Jews had been raised to despise each other. They were not friends. They were enemies. The Samaritan saw a man beaten up and left for dead. We don't know if he is a Samaritan or a Jew. But does it really matter? The Samaritan acts in a way that provides for the well-being of that person beaten and left for dead. The Samaritan has love for this person. Would his response been different if he knew that the person beaten up was a Jew? Perhaps. But as the story goes, a priest and a Levite walk past the man and keep going without stopping. It is

extremely unlikely that the priest and the Levite were in Samaria. So it goes without saying that the Samaritan was traveling in Judea. That means the man beaten by the side of the road is very likely a Jew. And it is quite likely the Samaritan knew that. But he looked past the old enmity that he was raised to believe. He didn't see an enemy. He saw someone he loved and he had to do something about it. What an amazing person this Samaritan was. The Samaritan loved his enemy. Not with a warm and fuzzy feeling, but with a desire for the enemy's well-being. And not just a desire. The Samaritan acted in ways that provided for the well-being of his enemy. This is what Jesus means by loving our enemies.

As I said last week, you and I are called as disciples of Jesus Christ to make connections with people. Just as Jesus stood eye to eye with others and removed all obstacles so that people could get to him, so we have to remove external and internal obstacles that separate us from one another. We are challenged to build relationships with rich people and poor people. And today we are being challenged to build relationships with our family and friends *and* our enemies. In other words, whoever you encounter, no matter who they are.

It is one thing to close the gap between the rich and the poor. It is a whole other level to close the gap between enemies. Let's face it. If you do desire the well-being of your enemy, staying away from them may be for their own well-being! There is something to be said for separate corners. Maybe what you can do for the well-being of your enemy is limited to staying away and avoiding doing any harm. But even that can be a challenge. How do we even get to the point of desiring the well-being of our enemies?

It seems to me that the only way we can desire and even contribute to the well-being of our enemies has to be rooted in our relationship with God who loves us no matter what. Because God is love, God loves all of creation. God loves every human being. God desires the well-being of every creature and does all God can to bring about the well-being of every creature. Of course, God is not the only actor. How else to explain the discord and brokenness in our world? But that's the subject for another sermon.

What I'm trying to say is that for us to have love for our enemies has to be involve an overflow of love that we receive from God. It helps to know how much you are loved by God so that you can love others. In fact, there is a scripture that says, "We love because God first loved us." Love comes from God. So the only way we can love, much less love our enemies, is to know that God loves us, desires for our own well-being, acts for our own well-being, no matter what. God's love is not conditional. We can always count on God's love. And the kicker is that God loves our enemies as much as God loves us. That is how radical God's love is. God desires your well-being and God desires the well-being of your enemy. When we act against the well-being of our enemies, we are frustrating God's desire.

What is God's desire for the special called session of the General Conference? Yesterday was a day of prayer and preparation. The deliberations over how the United Methodist Church will move forward begin today and last until Tuesday evening. A lot will be said in these three days. There will be a lot of rhetoric, a lot of emotion, and very likely a bit of pain. It pains me to say that there will be times over these next few days when some people at the conference will wonder if everyone there desires their well-being. People may wonder if there is any love at the conference.

Surely God desires the well-being for everyone at the general conference. God desires the well-being of every person who identifies with the United Methodist Church. The challenge is, will we find a way forward that cares for the well-being of all of us? That is my prayer and I hope it is yours too. Let it be our prayer that love will prevail over these next three days. What that will look like may not be what any of us would choose. But whatever happens, let us hope that what God desires will happen.