

## “MY CHEEK HURTS”

Luke 6:27-38 February 23, 2025

Have you ever been faced with what seemed like **an impossible task**? Maybe it was cleaning out a grandparent’s house who never threw anything away. Maybe you had to write a doctoral dissertation, and you don’t even like to write. Maybe your doctor wants you to lose 50 pounds and cutting out ice cream is like losing a best friend. Maybe you have to tell a friend a truth, they would rather not hear at the risk of your friendship. These and others seem like impossible tasks at first glance, but in reality, most of them involve simply breaking the impossible task into smaller tasks. Start with just the kitchen table in grandma’s house, write one paragraph a day for your dissertation, have one scoop of ice cream instead of 5. Often, we will discover our impossible tasks aren’t as difficult as we think. We just can’t accomplish them all at once.

Then again, there are those undertakings that seem well beyond us. For instance, Jesus is teaching what is known in the Gospel of Luke, as the Sermon on the Plain, a shorter version than the Mount one found in Matthew, yet no less challenging. In the middle of the sermon Jesus states, **“But I say to you who are listening; Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.”**

We can just imagine the crowd of mostly farmers and small businesspeople shaking their heads and saying, “Love my enemy, you’ve got to be kidding! Isn’t that an impossible task? After all, isn’t an enemy

by definition someone hated rather than loved? And isn't an enemy who is loved no longer an enemy? How am I supposed to love an enemy who strikes me in the face and takes away my coat, especially at this time of year? Jesus you are asking the impossible of us. I just can't turn off my emotions towards someone who seeks to do me or those whom I love harm.

Jesus is speaking to a crowd that had plenty of people to hate; Roman soldiers who oppressed them, disreputable tax collectors, unjust rulers, and rich people taking advantage of them. Just take your pick. And when Luke writes his gospel the Christian Church was under persecution. This new faith is misunderstood, seen as affront to the emperor worship, and is in competition with the other religions and philosophies of the day. Even though the faith, is growing amongst mostly poor and marginal people, it is a faith under duress. How do you deal with people who abuse, malign, arrest, kill, and see you as the enemy? Jesus said, "Love them." And the people thought, "**Right!**"

## **I. WHO IS MY ENEMY?**

This might sound like an irrelevant sermon, after all, one may proclaim they have no enemies. Perhaps you live in a great neighborhood, well there is that little bratty kid who keeps tramping on your flowerbed, or that neighbor with six cars in the yard, all jacked up with a tire missing, but you hardly consider those as enemies. And maybe you had great co-workers, and a boss who was supportive and kind. Maybe your family is

really close, even the daughters-in-laws, and your family gatherings are something you look forward to. Maybe you didn't grow up in a war zone and have had a relatively peaceful life. But that is not the case for everyone.

Some people live in racially and economically divided neighborhoods. Some had the misfortune of a dysfunctional family, abusive parents, or addiction issues. Some may have been ostracized because of their orientation, nationality, or financial status. Some might have to deal with an obnoxious landlord or a boss's sexual harassment. For some the systems they deal with on a daily basis prevent them from getting a job, medical care, or even a decent place to live. Make no mistake, these folks can put a face to their enemy.

We might not have a direct enemy, but then again, many would argue that we are living in a time when the United States can be described as a nation of enemies, a nation at war with itself or **a house divided**, as President Lincoln put it. Seen in this light, there isn't a person alive who doesn't have an enemy and probably more than one. Here is a short list of some battle lines:

- Vaxxers vs. anti-vaxxers
- Maskers vs. anti-maskers
- Republicans vs. Democrats
- Liberals vs. conservatives
- Pro-lifers vs. Abortionists

- Vegans vs. carnivores
- Rich vs. middle class
- Rural vs. urban
- Immigrant vs. Citizen

This list doesn't even account for multifaceted issues such as race, climate change, and the future of social security. Even our entertainment is filled with stories of violence, revenge, betrayal, murder, and abuse. When I listen to the language of everyday people, so much of it is filled with intolerance, hatred, and prejudice. See, an enemy becomes anyone: who contradicts you, crosses you, or antagonizes you, who makes life hard for you, or who seeks to use power to exploit others. Make no mistake, we can even have enemies in church.

Jesus said, **“Love your enemy; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat 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 asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”**

So what is Jesus asking of us, actually commanding us? First, we must understand the Greek word Jesus uses for **love**. It is agape love or love that pursues the good of an enemy. **“Do good, Bless, Pray, Give”** Jesus commands. He doesn't say, “think good thoughts or have good

feelings,” but actually, “do good to those who hate you.” The love Jesus speaks is action oriented not feeling oriented. Jesus doesn’t say you have to like, agree with, nor desire an enemy to be your best friend. (**Note that Jesus says, “Pray for those who abuse you,” not “Stay with those who abuse you.”**).

Jesus is teaching his disciples, who live as the minority in a hostile culture, how to respond to those who were antagonistic to them with definitive actions – Do good, bless, pray for, and give. While these commands seem impossible and impractical, they were actually very useful. They demonstrated to the culture that Christians were not hostile, were not trying to destroy the empire, but were rather a force for good in an often-dark world. He was not telling them to kill their enemies with kindness but rather giving them a strategy for survival. It takes a lot of work to hate people who are working towards your good. By doing good it might just pave the pathway for peace.

### **III. IMITATE GOD.**

**Paul J. H. Schoemaker** is research director of Wharton’s [Mack Institute for Innovation Management](#), executive chairman of Decision Strategies International and the author of numerous books and articles. He recently visited South Africa, where he met with government and business leaders to discuss **Nelson Mandela’s** legacy. He wrote an article about why Madela was a good transformational leader. He summed Mandela’s leadership up with these principles:

1. Unwavering commitment to a long-term vision of justice and hope
2. Not escalating violence and only answering in kind when no other options remained
3. Acting with dignity toward those who wronged him, including his jailers
4. Taking the long view on urgent decisions while remaining firm to principle
5. Moving alone when necessary, but without betraying his friends and party
6. Articulating compelling arguments that eventually persuaded his opponents
7. Showing sensitivity to the dilemmas of adversaries, with some yielding as needed
8. Appreciating the power of symbols and public gestures of genuine magnanimity
9. Ability to forgive in order to be free from feelings of revenge and victimhood
10. Weaving key decisions over time into an evolving tapestry of equality and freedom
11. Placing reconciliation with those who opposed his struggle at the top of his agenda.

Nelson acted in Love and it changed the culture of South Africa.

And Jesus said, **“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for God himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”**

Jesus is commanding his disciples to love their enemies because God loves them, and the Lord is merciful and does good to all. Jesus sets a **higher standard** for us than the world’s treatment of their enemies. The world’s way of dealing with enemies is to seek out and destroy, punish, belittle, get revenge, and conquer. That’s the problem when one regime takes over the previous regime. The oppressed become the oppressors. The new leaders end up imitating the hatred of those who hated them. And so, violence, prejudice, and enmity are passed down for generations, just look at the Middle East. The new conquerors end up being no better than the previous one, although they like to think themselves so much more noble.

Jesus states there is another way to live, God’s way, the way of mercy, grace, truth, and love. Don’t judge, condemn, or hold on to hate. Instead, give and work for the good of all. In doing so you demonstrate whose children you are. **Martin Luther King Jr.** once said, **“I have decided to stick with *love*. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”**

**Parker Palmer**, a Christian teacher and writer, talks about a **good friend** who labored at a particularly difficult assignment at the **New York Catholic Worker House**. These communities service homeless and hungry people, others reach out to immigrants or trafficked people and provide basic needs. One day, Palmer said to her, “All the facts I can gather and all the feelings I have tell me this work you are trying to do is just impossible. There’s no success in it. There’s no gratification. The tide keeps rolling over you. Why do you do it?”

The woman answered, “**Parker, the thing you don’t understand is this: Just because a thing is impossible — that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.**”

Friends, Jesus is bringing the Kingdom of God on earth, a kingdom that demands love for the enemy. Any normal person would say that it is impossible, especially from a cross. But Jesus does it any way. He calls us to live the impossible too, even one enemy at a time. Amen.



# First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

## Sunday, February 23, 2025

### Second Scripture Lesson

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#### Luke 6:27-38

<sup>27</sup>“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup>“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup>“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be To God.**