

I have to do what?

Luke 6:27-36

Truth be told, I'm often uncomfortable when someone tells me they love me. I'm not talking about an honest affirmation by honest people. I'm talking about the person who just took my hide off and ends the verbal shellacking with an account of godly affection. "Jeff, you're a rotten, no good, lousy person, but because I'm Christian I love you." Thanks just the same, but I'd rather be despised.

Occasionally someone I have a difficult time loving crosses my path. And if I'm honest with myself I admit I'd be fine if they'd dropped off the face of the earth or at least found another pastor to criticize. Will Rogers may never have met a man he didn't like, but the rest of us know that somewhere along the line we run into folk we flat-out don't like. At least I have.

The lesson this morning is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. It is plain talk -- tough talk -- hard to listen to talk. It is perhaps Jesus' most difficult teaching. It's a teaching that sets the Christian faith apart from other religious perspectives, philosophic constructs, psychological systems and common sense. And yet, at the end of the day, it defines the core of Christian ethics.

"**Love your enemies,**" Jesus says. "**Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**" Really? Can we really love our enemies? If not, why did Jesus lay out this impossible demand? If the teaching troubles you, fear not, **Christians have always had a rough time figuring out, or crawling out from under, Jesus' categorical demand that we love our enemies.**

A hundred years ago Albert Schweitzer believed that Jesus, or the early church which actually recorded the teaching, never intended that we could live like that -- at least not for long. Schweitzer held that the early church believed Jesus was going to return to earth very soon -- in a few years at most, and that the command to love one's enemies was a temporary edict; what was called an interim ethic. It was like holding your breath. You can do it for a while. But Jesus did not immediately return, and the church was stuck with an ethical command no one can live up to.

Paul, who had probably heard about the saying even though he wrote before the gospels were completed, puts an interesting twist on it. Quoting from the often less than inspiring book of Proverbs, he says, "If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him drink, for by so doing you heap burning coals upon his head." Loving your enemy, it turns out, is just another way to tick him off or do him in. I doubt that's what Jesus had in mind.

We can kick and squirm and reinterpret the Lord's words, but when all is said and done I have to believe that Jesus meant what he said. We are to love those who despise us and bless those who curse us.

"That's so radical," you say? Yes. It certainly is! Which is what makes it so - Christian. And **most people don't want our Christianity to be that radical.** We'd rather it be a bit more socially acceptable, comfortable, in line with the way we ordinarily do things. We want a nice, safe, domesticated Christianity. And loving our enemies just does not fit.

Nor is it the way of the world. Not by a long shot. When your enemy is down you stomp on him. If you're hit on one cheek you make sure you hit back twice as hard. If he brings a knife to a fight, you bring a gun. If they drag you to court, you hire Joel "The Hammer" Stanley. That's realistic. That's how the world goes. No doubt about it.

Christians, of course, did not invent love, nor do we have a monopoly on it. I don't know of any culture or system which denies the rightness of love. The difference comes in defining whom you love. The world says, "Love those who love you." So we come here to church and we love one another. Nothing wrong with that.

But you don't need to be a Christian, or any faith for that matter, to love those who love you. If we take this text seriously, we're confronted with something beyond the way of the world, something beyond an ethic of mutual satisfaction. We have a whole new, radical, difficult – and maybe even impossible -- ethic.

Jesus nowhere implies that Christians won't have enemies. While I like to think Christians are able to get along with everybody, I remember Jesus said, "Beware when all speak well of you." If I never do or say anything that is going to disturb bigots, racists, those who trust in violence, those who live off injustice, the insensitive, the crude and rude, I may never have an enemy. But neither will I have been faithful to the gospel. Christians will have enemies all right. What we need to be certain of is that we have the right enemies.

I am not afraid of being controversial. If Christianity implies being so neutral about everything that you never have an enemy to contend with, Jesus wasn't much of a Christian. While there is no virtue in going around making enemies, and while Christians should try and get along with everyone, if we are faithful to the Gospel there will be those who try to silence us.

How are we supposed to love our enemies? Can we take a pill, or quote a verse or say a prayer which changes our hearts? If I do not love someone, can I twist myself around, convince myself that in fact I do love them? Can I banish, as if by sleight of hand, my negative attitude? If that's what it takes, I may get an "A" for effort but an "F" for performance. I can't make myself love those I detest, or those who detest me. If you can, please share your secret.

If I can't feel differently, maybe I can act differently. And maybe the difference in how I act is the only way I'll be able to change my mind. **"Bless those who curse you," says Jesus. "Pray for those who abuse you ... To a person who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other ... And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them."**

Maybe the secret is in the doing. I may not be able to control my feelings; I may not be able to pretend to feel differently than I do. But I can control my actions. As I have told people: it's easier to act your way into a new set of feelings than to feel your way into a new set of actions.

If I'm on the outs with someone and wait until my opinion or mood or feelings change, chances are I'll be waiting a long time. The only hope of breaking the log-jam is if one of us, namely me, changes how I act. And I may not be able to change my attitude unless I first change my behavior. Which may be the only hope I have of turning an enemy into a friend.

The sayings of Jesus in this Sermon on the Plain are not a diagram of how things work in the world, but a picture of how things work in God's kingdom. That's what Jesus came to usher in, and that's what the church is in the world to show.

That there's another way to order life, a way the world does not understand. That we're not stuck with the law of tooth and fang. That we're the advance party of God's kingdom.

That we, the church, have been assigned the task of etching out a beachhead for the kingdom on the inhospitable shores of a world now ruled by the ethic of revenge and violence. That we are God's emissaries and that we live as if the kingdom of God has already come.

For in us, by the grace of God, the Holy Spirit dwells. So we live and work by faith, giving ourselves in service to the one whose kingdom is both in our midst and on the way. It is for the coming of that kingdom we pray, waiting for that day when it is as real on earth as it is in heaven.

Can we really love our enemies? By the rules of the world, probably not. But by the grace of God we can -- and most assuredly, we must.