

Dare to Be Different!

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

What the most radical, different group of people you can think of? I remember growing up in the sixties and seventies. I saw and heard about the “hippies.” Boy they were different. It seemed everything they did was the opposite of what I was used to. They had long hair, no real jobs, drugs, free sex, loud and crazy music. My parents didn’t do that kind of stuff. I didn’t see it in our neighborhood or church. They were so radical, so different.

But the hippies were not the most different people we can see in this world. The most radical, different, strange group of people out there are Christians. Yes, Christians. We are the ones who go against the grain, who are different from everyone else. It is the world that wants to redefine or disregard marriage. It is the world that doesn’t respect life or authority, who want to go their own way. When the world acts that way, they are just being normal for that is how sinful human beings normally act. It is God and his Christians who go against the grain.

So, friends, Jesus comes to us today in our gospel reading. He dares us to be different, different than the rest of the sinful world.

I. God is different; he loves even his enemies.

You know the golden rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You don’t have to be a Christian to understand that. Even unbelievers believe in the golden rule. They practice it, or they think they do. Lutheran pastors can be really good bird dogs. It seems wherever we go we flush out other Lutherans. A while back I met a lady who was a cashier at a store. We had some small talk as she checked me out. When I told her I was a pastor she said was Lutheran. She couldn’t remember which synod and admitted she had gone to church in a while, but she was so proud to be a Lutheran. She boasted how she tried to follow the golden rule. One time a friend of hers got her mad, but instead of getting angry back, she tried to be nice. I asked if she treated her enemies that way. She had this puzzled look on her face and said, “Of course not.”

Everyone would agree we should do unto others as we have them do to us, but we don’t act that way. We are nice to those who are nice to us, but have trouble being nice to our enemies. Jesus says that is not love. ***“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full.”*** Love means you love everyone, not just those who are nice to you. The golden rule means to treat everyone as you would have them treat you, not just those who are nice to you. Occasionally we see someone loving an enemy. Outside of Fredericksburg, Virginia, there is a statue of a Confederate soldier giving a wounded Union soldier some water from his canteen. That does happen, but not often. It happens so little we make statues of it when it happens. The norm is to shoot your enemy, get even, get mad. If you hurt someone’s feelings, you would hope he would forgive you. If he hurts your feelings, you want to get mad and get revenge.

The world thinks it follows the golden rule, but it doesn’t. Otherwise the courts wouldn’t be full of divorce cases or lawsuits as we sue one another. No, the golden rule and the definition of love means to you love everyone and treat everyone the way you want to be treated, even your enemies. ***“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”***

The Lord’s words here are very clear and very strong, so strong we want to tone them down. But we can’t. He means what he says. Love knows no bounds. The world insists on its rights and will fight for them, taking people to court, stepping all over them. The Christian is willing to suffer injustice. If they hate us we don’t hate back; we do good to them, bless them, and pray for them. If they hurt us we don’t strike back. We even give them the other cheek to hit. If they sue us, we not only give them our cloak, we offer our shirt. Even if an enemy wants to borrow something, we lend to them and don’t expect to get paid back.

That is too far, at least by worldly standards. We would call such a person a fool. If we don't stand up to them once in a while, they will continue to hurt and harm us and trample on us. The world will argue with Jesus on this, and we do, too, sometimes. There is no way anyone can love that much. But someone can. Someone does. This is how much God loves us. He doesn't love us because we are pretty decent folks. If he did then he is no better than a sinful human being. No, he loves us even as we rebel against him and say "no" to much of what he wants in our lives. As Paul states in Romans 5, while we were God's enemies, he reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son.

And Jesus displayed this kind of love. When they crucified him, he prayed for them, asking God to forgive them. When they arrested him in the garden, he didn't call down 6,000 angels to defend him. He let them arrest him. When the soldiers beat him and mocked him, he remained silent before them. When the entire court proceeding was laughable and unjust, Jesus let it happen. He endured all that because he loves the sinner. He endured and tolerated all that because he wanted to save the sinner. Letting evil men hurt him and crucify him actually helped him to save us as he suffered and died for our sins on that cross.

II. Dare to be different like Christ.

Can you imagine if humans could actually live like that? Can you see how radical and different the world would be if we followed the Lord's example and loved as he loves us? But who is able to do that? Not humans. Not flesh and blood. But true disciples of Christ are no longer flesh born of flesh. We are born again of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. We have become children of the merciful God. ***"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."*** Every year I see more and more of my father in me. So the Christian. We want to act and look more and more like our heavenly Father. We are now children of God and we want to be true to our heritage. We want to love our enemies for the hope the light of Christ might shine on them.

Doesn't that mean we will lose things? If they sue and we don't fight back, then we lose something. If we don't insist on our rights, then we will lose something. If we don't hold onto our things like kids fighting over toys, then we will lose things. Right? Wrong. ***"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*** God promises to pour his blessings into our lives so much, it will be like making root beer floats and pouring so much root beer in it that it overflows. And when we drink some, mom pours more in. Yes, we will probably lose things if we love our enemies. But God makes sure we are still blessed so much it will overflow. And that doesn't even include such wonderful blessings like forgiveness and the satisfaction that we are treating people just as God treats us.

During the Roman persecutions, many of the Roman soldiers and officials became Christians themselves. They marveled at how Christians passively endured persecution, even execution without cursing and fighting back. In fact, historians have commented that the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church as Christianity grew by leaps and bounds. Those Christians dared to be different, and that difference led many to ask why. Today Jesus dares us to be different like him. Sure, it will mean letting the wicked take advantage of us, and if we turn the other cheek to them, they might actually hit us again. But that is what God endured to save us. That is love. As his adopted children, let his light shine as we dare to be different. Maybe, just maybe, someone will ask why, and we can tell him. Amen.