

Sermon 20 February 2022 Love your Enemies

Luke 6:27-36

‘Love your enemies’ – without doubt this is the most difficult and challenging of all the commandments Jesus gives us. Who can put their hands on their heart and say that they genuinely love their enemies? It’s a big ask. In terms of attitude and the way we are expected to respond to people, Jesus could be quite revolutionary. But firstly, we need to have a look at just what he means by ‘love’ in this context.

In the Bible we come across four meanings of love. In Greek there are *philia* which means ‘affectionate regard’ or ‘friendship.’ There is *eros*, which is what we feel for our partners. There is *storge*, which is a feeling of tenderness and affection, especially of parents and children. And then there is *agape*, which is the word used in this context.

Agape is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. It is the highest form of love in the Bible and perfectly describes the love Jesus had for all people. In the same way, it defines God’s love for mankind, for you and me. It means that no matter how others might treat us, we will go out of our way to be good and kind to them. Don’t tell me that is not the most difficult thing to do. Basically, it goes against our natural instincts.

For this reason, this form of love is something we have to consciously enact and work on. The love we feel for our partner, for our parents, children and friends just happens. It is quite natural and we can’t really help it. Loving those who hurt us is something quite different. Our instinctive feelings are quite the opposite, and so we have to make a very determined and conscious effort to reverse those feelings and to replace them with feelings that go completely against the grain.

It is because this is so very difficult to do and goes against our natural instincts, it becomes such a powerful tool in terms of relationships. What we are talking about here is forgiveness, and forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love. It is forgiveness that not only repairs and sustains relationships, it is really the foundation of all relationships. I include in that not only your relationship with one another, but just as importantly with God and with Christ.

How often have we made the point that to be a follower of Christ is challenging. This commandment, ‘to love our enemies’ is a perfect example. I am sure I am not alone when I say that I find it the most difficult aspect of Christ’s teaching and direction to follow. I think I am a bit like the elderly Virginian woman who lived to see her beloved town occupied by Union troops at the end of the American Civil War. One day, while walking down the street, she tripped and fell. A Union soldier courteously helped her up. ‘How kind of you, young man,’ she said acidly. ‘If there is a cool spot on hell, I hope you get it.’ Not sure where that rates on the forgiveness scale.

There is an important aspect to this commandment from Jesus that we need to take on board. On the one hand, it is certainly an attitude, a way of responding to people that reaps all sorts of benefits, and for that reason Jesus wants us to act accordingly. But let's also remember that Jesus is giving us this commandment because this is what God is like. This reflects the nature of God. The whole purpose of the existence of Jesus is to reveal to us the true nature of God, and this commandment does exactly that. We are loved unconditionally by God, no matter our faults or mistakes.

I want to finish with a true story. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa to deal with what happened under apartheid. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a member of this Commission. A frail black woman in her seventies is in the courtroom. Facing her across the room are several white security officers from the former apartheid regime. One of them is Mr van der Broek. He has been tried and found implicated in the murders of both her husband and son.

Mr van der Broek came to her house. He took her son and shot him. A year later he returned to her house and took her husband and he was also killed. Now this woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr van der Broek. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission representative turns to the woman and asks, 'So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who so brutally destroyed your family?'

The woman says calmly, 'My husband and my son were my only family. Therefore, I would like Mr van der Broek to become my son. I want him to come to my village weekly and spend a day with me so that I can pour out whatever love I have still remaining in me. And now I would like Mr van der Broek know that I offer him my forgiveness, because in the end Jesus Christ died to forgive. This would have been my husband's wish. So now would someone please lead me over to Mr van der Broek that I may embrace him and let him know he is truly forgiven.'

Bottom line, the Christian ethic is all about being positive to one another. 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' In other words, we thrive when we are treated positively, so that is simply how we need to treat others. And when we do that we grow, and if there has been any hurt, then healing takes place, and again, we grow.

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