

The Good Life: Reconciled

*A sermon preached on Luke 6:27-38 on Sunday, February 23, 2025,
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I.

The great author, teacher, activist, minister in the 20th century fight for civil rights, Howard Thurman, used to tell a story about his grandmother. She owned some land, and just next door, there was a white woman who lived adjacent to her and did not like the fact that the Black woman next door owned land. Well the white woman decided she was going to make sure Thurman's grandmother knew how she felt, so she went to her chicken coop and got all the manure and dumped it on his grandmother's land – on her tomatoes and her greens and everything she was growing, just for the sake of destroying it. But when Howard Thurman's grandmother realized that her garden was now full of manure dumped there to destroy everything, she got up in the morning and took the manure and just mixed it in with the soil as fertilizer. Every day this same routine would repeat itself. The woman would dump manure at night, and Thurman's grandmother would get up in the morning and turn it over and mix it in.

Now the woman next door eventually grew ill and neared the end of her life – and it seemed that she wasn't just mean to grandma, she was mean to everybody, so nobody came to see her when she became ill. But Thurman's grandmother decided to go next door and bring her neighbor some flowers. She knocked on the door, and heard this frail voice summoning her to come in. You can just imagine the shock on the face of the neighbor, looking upon Thurman's grandmother in utter disbelief that despite the cruelty, despite the

open disregard, despite the racism, this Black woman would come to visit. She was profoundly moved.

As Thurman's grandmother placed the flowers next to the woman right by her bed, the woman said to her, "These are the most beautiful flowers I've ever seen. Where'd you get them?" Thurman's grandmother smiled and said, "You helped me make them, because when you were dumping in my yard ... I decided to plant some roses."¹ Love your enemies, Jesus says.

II.

That's where we start today with the story of Jesus's sermon on the level place. He's blessed the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, and brought woe to the rich, the full, the laughing, the privileged. "But I say to you that are listening," Jesus said, knowing he'd need to make such a caveat, "love your enemies." Let's be clear: this is the first time Jesus talks about love in the Gospel of Luke. In other words, Jesus doesn't soften up the instructions about love first by talking about loving one's family or friends, not even loving one's neighbor. Loving your enemies is precisely where he begins.

"Enemies" feels like a strong word to me and maybe to you too. Perhaps you think to yourself: *I don't have any enemies... that I know of, at least!* But I bet we all have people in our lives who have wronged us, people who have belittled or bullied us, people who have caused us inordinate anguish and pain, people who have abused their power or privilege at our expense and made us feel terrible along the way. When you think about these folks, you feel your skin start to flush, your blood pressure rise, and you either want to

¹ As told by Rev. Otis Moss III from Krista Tippett's *On Being* episode, <https://onbeing.org/programs/rev-otis-moss-iii-the-sound-of-the-genuine-traversing-2020-with-the-mystic-of-the-movement-howard-thurman/>

yell at them, or burst into tears, or find a thick blanket to pull over your head and hide. You know the kind, right?

Maybe it feels like a stretch to call them “enemies,” but you sure aren’t calling them friends! And the call to love them, do good to them, bless them, pray for them – that might feel, well, *offensive* to you, right? Doesn’t Jesus know what she did to me?! Did he miss all the lies and the ego and the maddening opinions flying around? Surely if I don’t respond with direct action, they’ll keep at it. Surely if I’m kind to them, that will somehow condone their terrible behavior. How is this even fair? I can’t possibly *love* this enemy, because I don’t even *like* them!

I’ve got to think that the first hearers of this message were feeling the same. And maybe that’s why Jesus keeps talking, why he gives us startling examples of what it looks like in practice. *Here’s my other cheek, not just the first one. Here’s my shirt, not just my coat. Here’s what you stole from me – keep it, it’s yours.*² Love expecting nothing in return. And that right there is the key to it all. Love isn’t a strategy for how to get ahead. Love isn’t a veritable quid pro quo. Love isn’t even a passive aggressive way to get back at those who’ve gotten under your skin. Love isn’t fair, because if you’re keeping a record, you’re saying “do to me the kind of good I’ve done to you,” instead of “doing to others as you’d have them do to you.” Love is filled with grace. It matters most, as Silas reminded us earlier! Love doesn’t end at the edge of our convictions, or political parties, or family units, or friend groups. It doesn’t stop at the boundaries of our property, our neighborhood, our way of life, our

² SALT Project, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/19/grace-in-action-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-7>

nation.³ Love does. It acts. It runs ahead like a father with a wayward child, and scoops up in compassion like a Samaritan with a man left for dead, and gathers in like a mother hen with her brood, and sacrifices like breathing a last breath while the crowds call for your crucifixion.

Bishop Michael Curry says, “the way of love will show us the right thing to do, every single time... It’s how we stay decent in indecent times. Loving is not always easy, but like with muscles, we get stronger both with repetition and as the burden gets heavier.”⁴

But to be fair – is there a heavier burden of love than that of loving one’s enemies? Is there a wearier call than doing good to those who hate you? Is there a deeper strain than blessing those who curse you and praying for those who mistreat you? No matter if your enemy is that person who hurt you terribly and never apologized, or the neighbor with the offensive political sign, or the frenemy you had in middle school, or the family member whose scars you’ll bear for a lifetime, or the doctor who missed the cancer diagnosis – the call to love is a far cry from tolerating, or put up with, or working around, or ignoring and hoping they’ll just go away. It’s bigger than not wishing them harm, or deleting the angry comment you start to write on that Facebook post, or smiling with gritted teeth when you run into them at the grocery. It’s broader than “just doing your best” when they’re around. Jesus says to *love!* Wishing for their good and do your part in making it so. Moving your body and your heart in the ways of love. Exercising the muscles of forgiveness, like Bishop Curry says, so that they get stronger with repetition.

³ Thanks to Bishop Michael Curry for this imagery! *Love is the Way: Holding Onto Hope in Troubling Times*, p23.

⁴ Curry, p27.

About Jesus' way of Love, Richard Rohr reminds us: "[this] is considered the most radical, demanding, and truthful of all of Jesus' teaching. Until there is love for enemies, there is no real transformation, because the enemy always carries the dark side of your own soul. Normally those people who threaten us carry our own faults in a different form. The people who really turn you off are very much like you."⁵ No wonder the burden is heavy.

Jesus doesn't stop there, because he knew we needed a doorway into loving our enemies through all the conflict, a path through the hurt, a way beyond the breach. He knew that this kind of love isn't easy to come by for most of us, and we'd need practice. So he gets specific. "If you love those who love you," he asks, "what credit is that to you? Even sinners can do that." Loving our neighbors is hard enough, but our enemies? That doesn't just demand an action toward someone else, but it also asks for a change in us. Loving our enemies dredges back up the reason they became our enemies in the first place! "So don't judge," Jesus says, "and don't condemn. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." In other words: *be reconciled*.

Be reconciled, by restoring relations after an estrangement, cleansing the debris of hurt and the rubble of despair. Of reconciliation, theologian Stanley Hauerwas said, "Reconciliation happens when my enemy tells me my story and I am able to say: That is my story."⁶ That was also Dr. Hauerwas's prayer for enemies, which said this: "Forgiving Lord, I do not want my enemies forgiven. I want you to kill them (as sometimes prays the psalmist!) Actually, I would prefer to pray that you punish them rather than kill them,

⁵ Richard Rohr, *Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount*, 157.

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas,

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/paperbacktheology/2017/10/stanley-hauerwas-prayer-enemies-learning-hate.html>

since I would like to watch them suffer. Also, I fear losing my enemies, since my hates are more precious to me than my loves. If I lost my hates, my enemies, how would I know who I am? Yet you have bent us toward reconciliation, that we may be able to pass one another Christ's peace. It is a terrible thing to ask of us. I am sure I cannot do it, but you are a wily God able to accomplish miracles. May we be struck alive with the miracle of your grace, even to being reconciled with ourselves. Amen.”⁷

Loving our enemies asks something of us. It doesn't require us to resolve the very conflict that got us here, but it does ask us to reconcile with the one involved.⁸ Loving our enemies understands that the longer we hold onto the resentment, the longer we are distorted by it. The more we feed it. The wider its grip has on our lives. The deeper we're bound by it. Because when you withhold forgiveness, Anne Lamott says, it is like you're drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.⁹

III.

In order to visit the soaring Chapel at Coventry Cathedral in England, you must first walk through its ruins. Because there, on November 14, 1940, German bombers reduced the St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry to rubble. Hundreds of lives were lost and thousands more buildings ruined. The next morning, the Cathedral's senior leader, Provost Dick Howard, stood in the remains of their sacred space and made the decision to rebuild: not as an act of defiance, but rather as a sign of faith, trust, and hope for the future of the world. He said so, some six weeks later, on the Christmas Day broadcast of the BBC live from the ruins, declaring that when the war was over, “we should

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “A Prayer for Our Enemies As We Are All Learning How to Hate,” *Prayers Plainly Spoken*.

⁸ Justin Welby, <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/reconciliation/reconciliation-ministry>

⁹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*.

work with those who had been enemies ‘to build a kinder, more Christ Child-like world.’”

You should know that after the Blitz, some symbols emerged from the rubble. Two charred roof-beams had fallen down in the shape of a cross, and thus were bound together and placed where the altar had once stood. And just a little ways away, three roof nails – marred and twisted by bombs – resembled a cross too. These would later sit at the high altar in the new Cathedral. But as that new Cathedral was built, the church elected to keep the ruins intact. The words “Father Forgive” were inscribed behind the roof-beam cross in the shell of what once was the chancel. A daily time of worship called the “Litany of Reconciliation” became part of this church’s practice. The preserved ruins became a symbol around the world over of forgiveness and peace-making. What hatred bombed, love built. A church that could have caved into itself in justified anger had instead been liberated by reconciliation.

I have to believe that this work of love for Coventry Cathedral started long before the first bomb fell. This type of forgiveness and reconciliation and grace doesn’t just happen. For that congregation, it likely grew over time with the calisthenics of compassion – a restored relationship here, an apology for a slight there. They trained for it by building consensus, and working out their differences, and refusing to split wide open because of disagreement about the color of the carpet. They worked those muscles of turning manure into flowers, of finding new life in even the deadest of places. All of it preparing them for when the burden of love was the heaviest.

Some sixty years later, a college choir was touring England that summer and shared a concert in the new Cathedral there in Coventry. Of course they

started first in the ruins. They heard the story. They ran their fingers over the etched words of forgiveness. They gazed at the cross of beams and contemplated the depth of love it portrayed. Surrounded by echoes of reconciliation, they began to sing.

Ubi caritas et amor, deus tibi est. Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.

Where charity and love are, God is there. Christ's love has gathered us into one.

As long as I live, I'll remember that day. Those ruins. That song. An impossible reconciliation made possible by the Great Reconciler. God with us. And the love that animated it all.

IV.

Jesus began, "but I say to you who are listening..."

Are you listening? Are you listening – not for the voice of a preacher but for the voice of the One liberating you from the burden of resentment into the gift of grace and reconciliation and love above all else?

Friends, may we be a church who exercises our muscles of forgiveness in the small ways and the big ones. And for each of us, may the burden of love be lighter with practice. May the grace of love lead to unimaginable reconciliation. And may the way of Love be the way we walk in these troubled times, now and forevermore. Amen.