A Sermon for Dayspring

By Eric Howell

*“Love Is In You”*

Luke 6:27-38

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Both Matthew’s Gospel and Luke’s Gospel include a long sermon from Jesus from early in his ministry. Matthew’s is known as the Sermon on the Mount and characterized by its opening beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Luke’s version is known as the Sermon on the Plain and is known by its opening beatitude, “Blessed are you who are poor.” Everyone notices that Matthew’s beatitude is spiritualized. It seems to be addressing a quality of the heart in a universal statement, while Luke’s seems to be more literal, directly addressed to members of his audience “you” who are in some kind of economic poverty. In Luke, all of Jesus’ beatitudes and his ‘woes’ are like that. They are specific, real-life, practical, and difficult dimensions of human relationships: Jesus speaks to you who are poor, hungry, mourning, hated; and you who are rich, full, laughing, well-regarded. Blessings for one, woes to another. Presumably both are within his field of vision as he speaks. Both are in his crowd, among those on the plain who were following him. I bet some people squirmed. I bet they all squirmed.

I wonder how they reacted when Jesus said “I say to all of you who are listening to me, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. What good is it to love someone who love you already? Anyone can do that. But if you love your enemies, expecting nothing in return, your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High God, for he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” I bet they squirmed.

We’re not used to being spoken to with this kind of direct communication. Or if we are, I’m much more comfortable if I know that everyone in the audience is already pretty much the same I am. If we’re all rich or we’ll all poor, or all mourning or all laughing, we feel more comfortable. We tend to congregate with people like ourselves.

Recently, I was at a dinner with some clergy and professors up at the Baylor Club. The dinner was nice enough but the discussion was serious, about all the problems in America, how the church has been complicit in many of them or at least has been feckless to do anything about it, and what is the church’s role in all of it anyway? It was a heavy conversation.

In the room right next door, there was another small gathering, also having dinner. I don’t know who was in that room or how they were invited to be there, but confused upon arrival, I almost went in that room instead of the one I intended. That’s how close the doors were to one another. Separated by a thin wall, the sign on the other room said it was a meeting hosted by a wealth management firm. I don’t know how many clergy or professors were in that other room, but I’m guessing not many. I don’t know for sure, but I’m guessing the evening’s discussion went somewhat differently. Can you just imagine if the wall between the rooms had been suddenly dropped like in those incessant car commercials, and we all suddenly found ourselves in the same room for the evening. Definitely real people, not actors. I wonder if something good would have come from something crazy like that. But that doesn’t happen very often, less and less so it seems. And that’s perfectly fine for most of us most of the time.

That’s why sports pep rallies are a lot of fun. When you go, you’re all in this together. Singing our songs, lauding our virtues, in preparation to engage in competition with the others, the them, the other side. The stakes are higher, but political rallies have the same energy. You pretty well know if you show up for a political rally that everyone there is pulling in the same direction, cheering on your side against the other side. There’s something very energizing about being in a crowd of like-minded people, with the same life experience, unified by a common purpose of defeating the “other.”

But what if that is the only space you ever inhabit? What if the only conversations you ever have, the only perspectives you ever consider, the only energy you ever feel comes from validation and celebration of you and your kind, you and your worries and goals and ideas?

What happens is the other person, in the other room, becomes your enemy. It doesn’t happen immediately but it happens invariably. It’s totally natural. It’s normal. And in some ways, it’s great fun. It’s clarifying to have an enemy. It’s even more fun to know who and what you’re against than to even really know what you’re for. Enemy is such a harsh word; it feels like the kind of word that should only exist about nations on battlefields in war. Most of us don’t have real enemies and don’t want enemies, of that kind at least. Most of us don’t live lives that are that interesting to have real enemies.

Yet I know what it’s like to be in conflict with someone who seems to want in a situation something inversely proportional to what I want. For them to win anything is for me to lose something. For them to be satisfied with victory feels nothing short of me losing everything that matters to me. I’m not sure I can say that person was my enemy, that seems too dramatic, but I’m also very sure that it felt like an epic struggle inside of me to find any love for that person.

I don’t know what to do with questions, “are we even supposed to love Nazis, or Russian Communists, or 9/11 terrorists?” That’s a kind of inner spiritual work that seems beyond my capacity. And I don’t know what it means to love someone like that that I’ve not met and never will. I don’t know what’s at stake in the question. What I do get is that pointing to those kinds of enemies is a way of testing the seriousness and limits of what Jesus is saying. Where’s the ‘yes, but’ we wonder. Love your enemies, except for those kinds. You don’t have to love them. I think that’s what we’re looking for. So, we reason, give to everyone who asks of you, but not the guy who’s obviously gonna buy booze with your couple of dollars. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer them the other. Yes, but at some point, you run out of cheeks to turn.

Truly, those are hard questions. How far must I go in this? Because let’s be honest, to do what Jesus is saying to do here: do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. You do all that, and you’re a sucker. Or you’re a saint. Or maybe one is the path to being the other.

What I do know is this: the Nazi, Communist, Terrorist question is for most of us a distraction and an excuse. The real work isn’t with them. It’s with your in-laws, your boss, your ex-spouse, your neighbor, the person you avoid making eye contact at family gatherings or church gatherings because they’ve hurt you and don’t even seem to know or care. You want to love a Nazi, that’s quite an aspiration and you may just be a saint someday. You want to know what to do with that person in the flesh, right here? That’s where the real spiritual/ inner work happens. That’s the arena of your Christianity. Where your soul will wrestle with wild beasts.

God is love. You were made in God’s image as God’s child. The path to living in the image and likeness of God goes right through that relationship that you know God is talking to you about in this passage. Your resentment, your unforgiveness, no matter how justified it may be, is the troll guarding the one bridge over the deep chasm that stands between you and flourishing in the grace and mercy of God who loves you. You have to deal with this troll. It is ugly and rude, and the longer it’s been there, the more it stinks.

The troll is not the other person. The troll is your unforgiveness, your lack of love toward the person. God loves those whom God has created, all of them. That troll seems impossible to pass, but it’s not. It’s nastier from a distance than it is up close. Your heart has the capacity to be bigger than it. It is all noise and rancor and memory and fear and ego. It wants to make you too afraid so you turn back because it knows, like the demon it is, that once you have tamed this beast, you are free.

“Human beings are made in the image of the Triune God, a God characterized by perfect communion. So human beings are created for loving communion with God, with one another, and with the whole creation. As Gregory of Nyssa suggested in the 4th century, our destiny is eternal communion with God that manifests the endless self-giving relations of love. Thus, human beings are not made to live as isolated individuals or [self-enclosed associations of clones]. We can only fulfill our purpose and destiny as human beings when we fulfill our God-given capacity for loving communion, for living as a part of the pattern of God’s creation.” Greg Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 114.

If you want to know why you’re stuck spiritually, ask God to reveal to you the person against whom you hold a grudge, a broken relationship, anger. The person you have not forgiven. That’s your path. There is no other. The path to happiness, to freedom, to joy in spiritual living goes right through, I’m sorry to tell you but you know it’s true, goes right though this place.

Love your enemies.

For some of you this is the most important work in your whole life. This right here. What do you do with the person or people who have hurt you? I won’t begin to project or even guess at all the places where that might be true in your life, but I’d be honored to sit with you and hear your story and pray with you. A lot of people here would, too. You’re not alone.

But I’m also fairly certain that some of that inner work for some people has to do with people you are in church with. On one hand, that’s just life. Unless you’re just casually observing the life of a congregation, if you’re really in it, you are part of the family and sometimes not all those relationships are always happy. It’s not just true about church. It’s about a neighborhood association, an office, a fraternity or sorority, a family. It’s just life. We get cross ways with people. Dealing with that is the path to our spiritual growth. That’s the on one hand. On one hand, it’s a general state of human affairs.

On the other hand, it’s specific. To here. Some of you have been doing the inner work of loving someone who hurt you for years. Next week, I am going to do some reflection in my sermon on our church discussions from three years ago about same-sex weddings. It’s been three years since then. I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently, looking back to that season in our lives; and it’s time, it seems to me, to pause and give reflection to that experience. I’ll talk about the Statement we crafted and adopted, and about DaySpring three years later. I think many of you would say that the most important work in the wake of that shared experience may be this right here, what we’re talking about today. It’s this word from Jesus: love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Even though I think you would agree that those descriptions—enemies, those who hate—that’s way too strong for relationships strained by disagreement, but if Jesus has the audacity to call us to love our enemies, then without question, he calls us to love one another in church, people who are not your enemy. We’re called to love one another.

The word for love, agape, does not mean romantic love, liking, or even a deep friendship with that person though those would be good fruits. You don’t have to like someone to love them. Love is a gift for which we can pray be infused to us by grace when it’s for someone we don’t like very much no matter who or where they are in your life. What agape love means is wholehearted, unreserved, unconditional desire for the well-being of another. There’s nothing held back, nothing reserved, no asterisks or fine print on this. You might not like that person. You might stand against what they stand for. You might oppose what they think is right and good. You can still do all of that. That’s part of human living too and for your good, and possibly for theirs, too. You don’t have to pretend that’s not true too, but if you agape love this person, you, even beyond your own natural will, find yourself doing good for them, blessing them, praying for them, being mysteriously open to learning from them, being vulnerable to them. That’s love.

If saints are made in this arena, they are not as hard to find as you might think. They are all around. The great biblical example is Joseph in Genesis, who reconciled with his brothers, who had, let’s see, stolen his special coat, thrown him in a pit, sold him to traders, and told their father he was dead. And he reconciled with them. And then there are civil rights marchers who forgave their abusers and who kept finding more cheeks to turn when they were slapped. High School kids who every single day navigate the halls of cliques and gossip and show mercy to those who make their lives hard. Saints are all around. Love is all around, even in most unlikely places. Love is in you. More than you may even realize.

Love costs you something. That much is for sure. What you can’t see now is what is waiting for you on the other side. The reward. We’re not supposed to do what we do for a reward, yet Jesus links our actions toward others with the blessings from God. Not only do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But also, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We need one another; we are the path for one another to the love of Jesus in whom faith, hope and love remain, but the most challenging, the costliest, also the richest, most meaningful, the greatest of these is love.

Brothers and sisters, prepare your hearts to receive the invitation and come before the table where He welcomes us.

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