

The Path of Least Resistance  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40  
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 6:27-38

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Though there will always be those who object, few would reject the gift of those sayings sewn into a cross stitch or painted on a piece of shiplap. Looks good to exhibit. Sounds laudable ... from a distance. As the loquacious Governor Pappy O'Daniel, exclaimed near the end of *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, "Sounded to me like he was harboring a hateful grudge against the Soggy Bottom Boys on account of their rough and rowdy past. Looks like Homer Stokes is the kind of fellow who wants to cast the first stone ... Well, I'm with you folks. I'm a forgive-and-forgettin' Christian, and I say, if their rambunctiousness, and misdemeanoring, is behind them ... It is, ain't it boys?"

Surely, we, too, can show mercy in the wake of a little rambunctiousness and misdemeanoring ... as long as it doesn't cost us anything. But Jesus doesn't let us get off that easy, does he? "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."

"Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you." Aw, Jesus, say it isn't so, 'cause I'm nursing some pretty good grudges these days. "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." Just makes you want to channel your inner John McEnroe, "You can't be serious!"

"Bless those who curse you ... If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also." What have you been sniffing, Jesus? Evidently, Jesus hasn't been sucked in by shows like *Succession* and *Yellowstone*.

"From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt." You know, the Property Committee hates it when Bible verses like these show up in worship. It irritates them immeasurably when I preach on texts like these. Why? It means they'll have to call the reupholstery guy and spend a bunch of money we don't have. Too many texts like these lead to threadbare pew cushions with all those defensive and agitated behinds squirming on them.

Texts like these inevitably spawn comments after worship like, "Well ... I sure hope **they** heard that." They? But the text says *You* ... like 29 times!" It's like the greatest hits of a band called ... Awkward!

What is going on here, Jesus? Well, as with last week's text from Luke, our reading today is part of what is called the Sermon on the Plain (not plane at the airport, but plain as in "Oklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain." A level place is what our translation calls it, and that is significant for Luke.

Some of you who've cracked open a Bible now and then may be scratching your heads, "I thought it was the Sermon on the Mount." That would be Matthew. Important Bible trivia: We have four Gospels, written by four different authors, to four different communities, with four different personalities, at four different times, the earliest (Mark) being written some forty years after the crucifixion/resurrection of Christ. The stories of Jesus came to these authors in different ways. We do know that both Matthew and Luke had the Gospel of Mark in front of them to frame their Gospels. In addition, Matthew and Luke had another common source from which they extracted today's narrative. Yet, they chose or felt led to present this story in different ways: Matthew on a mountain; Luke on a plain.

Why would Luke choose to set the encounter on the plain? After all, it was on the mountain that Moses received the Law of God. It was

on a mountain that Jesus would be transfigured and seen in the light of God's glory. The Psalmist directs the people of God, "Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy."

However, in Luke's rendering, Jesus has been on a mountain to pray, but has come down from the mountain to the plain. As Whitney read to you last week, "He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." We can't say for certain why Matthew's mountain becomes Luke's plain, but the idea of a level place is certainly in keeping with the character of Luke's Jesus. One commentator actually referred to Jesus as *the great leveler*.

Surely, Jesus had memorized the Psalmist's prayer: "My eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me." Luke's Gospel is consistent in its emphasis on removing status from the equation of how God sees people. Status has no place in the economy of God. A pregnant Mary sings God's praise, "he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." Quoting Isaiah, John the Baptist declares, "Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low." Jesus, quoting Isaiah says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free." When the disciples were trash talking, debating their own greatness, Jesus took a child in his arms saying, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

Luke's concept of the kingdom of God is equality before God and Luke's template for the church is equality before God. Heaven is a level place. And this cannot happen without the hard work of mercy and the sacrifices inherent with love. There is a world outside these walls that hears our words of mercy and love as naive and irrelevant, our ways as inane and inadequate for life in this gritty, hyper competitive, antagonistic, what's-mine-is-mine-what's-yours-really-should-be-mine, zero sum habitat called earth, where apologies are rare or poorly phrased, seldom meant, and void of repentance; where a generosity of spirit is dismissed as reckless and peacemakers are labeled as weak. Why, one could even go so far as to say Jesus' counsel in this text is a

license for others to take advantage of you, abuse you, repress you, lock you into a life of failure. Thus, Jesus is portrayed as meek and mild, nonviolent and conciliatory, so out of step with how the world really works.

In the classic football movie, *North Dallas Forty*, which came out the year I graduated from high school and probed the dark side of professional football, a priest comes forward to offer the pregame prayer. With eyes closed and arms raised high, he prays the boiler plate of platitudes - *I ask your blessing on these brave boys as they venture out for battle ... We ask not for victory, not for glory, not for fame ... We ask only for the preservation of our bodies and minds...* And just as the monsignor finishes with a flourish of praise, the left tackle about bowls him over shouting, *Let's go kill 'em!* (A line I needed to edit for the purpose of worship.)

Through the centuries, the church has winced at this critique to the extent that it sought to ally the church with triumphal images of power, brute strength, and conquest: the Crusades; the manifest destiny of the European conquerors in Latin America; pietistic slaveholders; the lust for power fueling the rise of the Moral Majority

and the wielding of power by their heirs; and curiously, in the shrunken three sizes too small t-shirts of megachurch preachers hoping to accentuate ripped biceps and deltoids. Macho Jesus seems to be a thing these days. Obviously, I'm out of luck when it comes to that.

However, when such images are set beside our text, the church's efforts to appear strong are revealed to be the opposite. You see, the pursuit of revenge, the desire for retribution, the lust for power, the goal of conquest, the objective of domination are the lights lining the path of least resistance. They reveal the combustible marriage of weakness and insecurity. When I am weak and insecure, I am desperate to compensate by wounding you, exploiting any arbitrary authority or advantage I have over you, magnifying my worth by minimizing yours. That's not power. That's weakness. That's not confidence. That's insecurity masked by arrogance.

In contrast, the path of resistance, and thus the weight room for strength is the hard labor of mercy and the toil of love. Samuel Wells, in his book *Love Mercy*, says, "Forgiveness is a decision by one or more parties not to be defined by resentment or antagonism, to seek a bigger life than one constantly overshadowed by this painful story ...

Forgiveness is the permitting of an artist to work the slash in a painting into a yet more textured ... artwork than the original.

Forgiveness turns the past from a storehouse of poison to a larder of nourishment; from an enemy to a friend. It is the letting-go of the longing to have a better past." (Samuel Wells, *Love Mercy*)

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Such work is the opposite of weakness.

Five days before Christmas 1943, a helpless American bomber pilot locked eyes with a German fighter pilot over the frozen skies of Europe. The pilot glanced outside his cockpit and froze. He blinked hard and looked again, hoping it was just a mirage. But his co-pilot stared at the same horrible vision.

"My God, this is a nightmare," the co-pilot said.

"He's going to destroy us," the pilot agreed.

"The men were looking at a gray German Messerschmitt fighter hovering just three feet off their wingtip ... having closed in on their crippled American B-17 bomber for the kill ... The B-17 pilot, Charles

Brown, was a 21-year-old West Virginia farm boy on his first combat mission. His bomber had been shot to pieces by swarming fighters, and his plane was alone in the skies above Germany. Half his crew was wounded, and the tail gunner was dead ... But when Brown and his copilot, Spencer "Pinky" Luke, looked at the fighter pilot again, something odd happened. The German didn't pull the trigger.

"2nd Lt. Franz Stigler was standing near his fighter on a German airbase when he heard a bomber's engine. Looking up, he saw a B-17 flying so low it looked like it was going to land. As the bomber disappeared behind some trees, Stigler tossed his cigarette aside, saluted a ground crewman and took off in pursuit.

As Stigler's fighter rose to meet the bomber, he decided to attack it from behind. He climbed behind the sputtering bomber, squinted into his gun sight and placed his hand on the trigger. He was about to fire when he hesitated. Stigler was baffled. No one in the bomber fired at him.

He looked closer at the tail gunner. He was still, his white fleece collar soaked with blood. Stigler craned his neck to examine the rest of

the bomber. Its skin had been peeled away by shells, its guns knocked out. He could see men huddled inside the plane tending the wounds of other crewmen.

"Then he nudged his plane alongside the bomber's wings and locked eyes with the pilot whose eyes were wide with shock and horror. Stigler pressed his hand over the rosary he kept in his flight jacket. He eased his index finger off the trigger. He couldn't shoot. It would be murder." He proceeded to escort them to safety over the North Sea, knowing German forces wouldn't shoot with his plane so close.

Stigler had reasons to pull the trigger. His brother, also a Luftwaffe pilot, had been killed earlier in the war ... There were 28,000 pilots who fought for the German air force. Only 1,200 survived. "The war cost [Stigler] everything," author Adam Makos says. "[American pilot] Charlie Brown was the only good thing that came out of World War II for Franz. It was the one thing he could be proud of."

Decades later, Charlie Brown would search for and locate Franz Stigler and they became the dearest of friends. (Mark Shea, *Patheos*)

Mercy? Love? They are not signs of weakness, they are the evidence of strength revealing the very glory of Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich;" who while we were yet sinners, died for us. Though it is hard work along this counterintuitive path of most resistance, it is the way of the kingdom of God. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Amen.