

Love Your Enemies

Luke 6:27-38

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC Camden, February 24, 2019

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the 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, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Johnny Lee Clary¹ used to be the Grand Wizzard of the KKK until he began to encourage young people not to join hate groups but to learn to love and respect all people. What happened? When asked Clary about his childhood, he was quick to point out that his father committed suicide and his mother wanted nothing to do with him. She sent his little brother to live with grandparents and him to live with his older sister in East L.A., one of the most notorious and crime ridden areas of California at the time.

His sister and her boyfriend were on drugs and made money selling them. Johnny found himself left to himself and constantly accosted and beaten by different gangs, many of them African-American. He had no friends. By the time he was fourteen, he was suicidal. Then he saw David Duke on TV who was the Grand Wizzard of the KKK at the time. He heard Duke say things Clary’s father had said about African-Americans. Given his recent experiences, he

¹ This story aired on Robin Young’s program “Fresh Air” in January of 2009. Clary has since died.

started to pay more attention. Duke spoke of black people taking over the country to wreak havoc and kill whites. Clary remembered that his uncle was a Klan member in Georgia and called him up.

Within days, an older gentleman rang his doorbell and told him: "Son, you've had an awful life. What you need is family. KKK stands for a circle of family." When Clary "became part of the family," he was first offered the shell of the bullet as a token of the trust he was being offered. Then, he was given the rest of the bullet and told that this bullet represented what would happen to him if he did not honor the brotherhood. Clary moved back south and joined the Klan. He became Duke's bodyguard and slowly rose through the ranks.

Then he met Rev. Watts, then the president of the NAACP and a close friend of Martin Luther King. Watts participated in public programs in which Clary was speaking out in hate, denouncing the intentions of blacks. Clary started calling Watts names in public to which Watts just kept replying, "God bless you. You can't get me to hate you. I am going to love you no matter what you do." Clary tried his best to make sure that Watts did not succeed. When he appeared with fellow clansmen at Watt's door dressed in their bedsheets, Watts opened the door and looked at them quizzically. Then he calmly said, "Fellows, I am sorry that I cannot help you. Halloween isn't until late October and I don't have any treats for trick or treat. Come back in October!" When Clary decided it was time to try some other form of intimidation, they set up a burning cross across the way from Watts house. After a while, Watts came out and asked them if he could contribute any hot dogs for their BBQ.

Another time, Clary and his friends spotted the preacher having his lunch in a restaurant. They walked in and positioned themselves around him just as Watts was about to bite into his chicken. In a loud voice, Clary said, "You have no business eating in this restaurant. I swear, I am going to do to you what you do to that chicken." By now, the noise in the restaurant had quieted. All eyes were on Watts and the clansmen. Watts took his time. Then he calmly took the sizable piece of chicken into his hands and gave it a big juicy kiss. People in the restaurant bust out laughing. Even Clary's fellow clansmen couldn't hold it in and laughed their way out of the restaurant. Clary was not amused.

Clary eventually made a threatening call to the church Watts served trying to disguise his voice on the phone. Watts replied, "Hi Johnny, I feel so honored you called. God, please forgive Johnny for acting so stupid. He doesn't mean to be so ornery." Clary later set the church on fire. The congregation decided to forgive Clary for that, too, and kept extending love to him. I don't know if Watts and the congregation knew any details about Clary's journey up to then. My hunch is that they trusted that there was a wounded and confused but beloved child of God behind that clansman's mask.

Thanks to the forgiveness and love Clary had received from the very people he thought were his enemies, he left the clan and became an outspoken advocate against racism. Watts became his mentor. When interviewed, Clary would give Watts and the church the credit for loving him into a new life. He would tell the stories of how Watts kept pulling out the rug out from under his hate, laugh and say: "I just didn't know what to do. He threw me off. He just kept telling me that he loved me."

I think this kind of loving, creative, non-judgmental and counter-intuitive way of life embodied by Watts and the congregation also reflects a good portion of Luke's message for today. Offering the other cheek is not meant as way of saying, "I am the doormat. Feel free to wipe your shoes." It is a way of standing up in and with love to an oppressor who will not be prepared for this kind of response. The same goes for offering your shirt also to someone who takes your coat. This does not mean that we endorse what is happening but we are asked to see through the surface appearance and love people in their waywardness.²

Jesus also quotes what we tend to call the Golden Rule that we should treat others as we wish to be treated, a teaching shared in many cultures. That is certainly a helpful measure and guide but it behooves us not to overlook that Jesus is asking his followers to go the extra mile. Don't just do what is expected of you with the people you are comfortable with (Luke 6:32-33). Do what has the potential for change and transformation for yourself and others. This is what Rev. Watts and the congregation did. They did not condone anything Clary stood for but they did not judge him as somehow unworthy of God's, and by extension, their own love. They knew he was their brother despite all evidence to the contrary.

² There are other such examples in the Gospel where Jesus is portrayed as calling people to a non-violent response in the face of violence (Matthew 5:38-42.)

I think that in order to be able to act from such a centered and connected place, you have to know exactly who and whose you are. A person who is still suffering or traumatized should never be expected to come from such a loving place. Think of all the clergy sex abuse survivors who have been waiting for so long to even be heard or get real support for their healing. Watts was in a place where the love of Christ could flow through him.³ We could say that Christ was living and speaking through Watts. Watts embodied what Paul describes with these words: “I live no longer, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Watts was beyond defining himself on the terms of a separate ego. He was a true person. As Rohr likes to point out, the word *per-sonare* literally means “sounding through.” A power of love greater than himself was flowing and speaking through him, and yet, he was not separate from it. Watts lived trusting that absolutely nothing had the power to separate him from that love. How rich and precious and powerful a life is that!?! This is an “allegiance” that is entirely different from that manifested by groups like the KKK.

As Christians we are also reminded that we are all in need of God’s mercy who refuses to limit her generosity to those who have already been affected and infected with love. God is kind to the “ungrateful and the wicked” as well (Luke 6:35b). Whenever we get lost in judgment or resentment about that, we ourselves risk the danger of losing sight of our own failings and join the ranks of the “ungrateful and wicked.” That in turn, makes us ever more needful of God’s mercy which actively undermines our tendency to separate ourselves from others.

I also trust that those who loved Clary despite and amidst his waywardness were not doing that because they were banking on some reward in a distant heaven. I do realize that our text speaks of such rewards and actually love the description of how bountiful it is: “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put in your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38). If we do what we do to get something out of God for ourselves and our individualized salvation project, we are caught in our own waywardness. If we can recognize how much greater and richer and fuller and beautiful and bountiful our lives can be when we can overcome what divides and hurts us,

³ If you don’t get Richard Rohr’s daily reflections, I strongly urge you to do so (www.cac.org; Meditations@cac.org). The post for February 23rd speaks to this very powerfully, as do other posts.

we will also recognize that this language of reward is primarily a description of the joy God wants us to experience together. There is so much of it that it is bound to overflow no matter what little tricks we might use to make it fit the bounds of our imagination.

For this coming week, I would like to urge each of us to do the hard work of asking ourselves where we are lost in judgment. Who would you currently name as your *enemy*? By the way, the meaning of the word *enemy* as derives from the Latin words *in* and *amicus* is 'not friend.' The word *friend* is derived from the root for the word 'to love.' In other words, who are you called to learn to love? And what is that person calling forth in you? Might there be aspects of what you are reacting to that are also a part of you? Might your own growth be directly tied up with learning to love that or whom you most seek to reject? If you feel like you are in a pretty centered place, consider imaging this person surrounded by light and warmth or pray for their well-being. Do the same for yourself. See what happens inside of you, perhaps very gradually as you repeat the practice. God just might bowl you over with a measure of a love so expansive that you won't care if you can keep it in check.

All thanks and praise be to God.