

**SERMON, Sunday, Feb. 24, 2019**  
**7 Epiphany, RCL C**

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...”

And alongside this eternal message comes the clamorous invitation to render our judgments on the names in the news: Manafort, McCabe, Kraft, Smollette, R. Kelly, the Virginia officials, Northam and Fairfax, Catholic bishops... Who is guilty as sin and deserving of harsh and swift punishment?

Jesus knows our human nature; he knows religious tradition; he knows how fiercely we cling to what we believe is sacred. He knows the *lex talionis* principle: ***We are justified to seek retaliation*** authorized by law, in which the punishment corresponds in kind and degree to the injury. And eye for an eye... We oppose those who oppose us; we disparage, ignore and avoid those who hate us; we hit back; we prosecute, punish, and crush our enemies. Lock ‘em up, and throw away the key.

Our religious beliefs and cultural customs can be like a rock frozen, unmoveable, in a layer of ice. In this instance, Jesus whacks this well-established mindset free it from its fixed position. He aims to move us all beyond the reflexive, age-old, monumental commitment to retributive justice. He means to open us to both the outlook, and the practice of unconditional love, grace and mercy.

Jesus makes this blunt force argument to deliberately knock down what we all believe to be unassailable conventional wisdom.

These teachings are clearly reverse-threaded. They sound implausible, impractical, and probably ***impossible to achieve even if we did decide to comply with them.***

“**Impossible**” and “**suicidal**” were two words used by WW II allied military commanders planning the Normandy campaign when the idea was proposed to land in small boats from the sea, scale the 30 meter vertical cliffs at Pointe de Hoc, and eliminate the enormous artillery pieces emplaced there. Why was this considered impossible? Because of the geographic adversity, and the presence of entrenched, well-armed, highly trained and battle hardened enemy combat troops, intent on destroying the landing teams. **Impossible...** Lieutenant Colonel James Rudder, and the three companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rangers Battalion, saw it differently. They trained with their goal clearly in mind. They overcame natural fear. They led the way, and others followed. Enough men made it up the cliffs to engage their opposition. The cannons had been moved more than a mile inland and concealed. The Rangers found them, disabled them, and blew up the adjacent ammunition dump. They did what conventional thinking said was impossible. They were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for their extraordinary gallantry, determination, and *esprit de corps*. Impossible?

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone, in 1848, faced the *impossibility* that women in the U.S. would be allowed to vote and hold public office. Why was that considered impossible? Because it had never been done before in the history of the republic. Because the opposition was not from armed strangers, but from brothers, fathers, and neighbors, friends and fellow citizens. Dedicated reformers persisted at state and federal levels for the next seventy years, with gradually growing success. Impossible? "**Failure** is impossible," said Anthony to her companions just before her death in 1906. The right of women to vote in the United States became law as the nineteenth amendment to our Constitution when it was ratified in 1920. Determined, self-sacrificing women had provided examples, and encouragement, for others to follow. We now take for granted what these determined suffragettes and their allies struggled for decades to achieve.

Loving our enemies, blessing those who curse us, and not returning insults for insults seems similarly impossible to achieve. Why? Because each of these goes against millennia of evolved instincts of self-preservation. The obstacle to achieving these godly gestures is not external to us in the form of fierce soldiers; it is not surrounding us in the form of well-known relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens. The obstacles to this kind of gracious loving are deep within us, rooted in our natural instincts and reflexes. We somehow, with God's help, have to master our normal human reactions, and summon up the godly response in its place.

In finding the way to love our enemies, we will need one to lead us surely. We follow Christ's lead. We agree, "let's do this thing. In our Lord's name, let's turn the world right side up!"

Some rightly ask, "exactly **how** do we "do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us..." And what does Jesus mean when he says, "If you do these things, your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."

Jesus tells us that **we are more than** merely flesh and blood offspring. As God's children--in contemporary terminology--we carry God's spiritual, moral, and relational DNA within us. As surely as water is wet, and fire is hot, so must our nature as God's children reveal the nature and character of God to a flawed, skeptical, confused, poorly led, struggling world population. In our daily actions and attitudes, people will see more than Geoffrey, or Leslie, or Cathy, or Doug, or Mallory, or Marge or Lou. People will see a gracious, loving God at work in the world.

Like Joseph in ancient Israel, who gives his treacherous brothers far better than they deserve, who shows kindness, and reclaims his family... Like Jesus, who doesn't strike back at those who mock, torment, and strike him, and leads the world in the way of salvation... We at St. Gabriel's are to be people whose nature and purpose are distinct from those of the surrounding population. We are to be our generation's light, its source of reassurance, its wisdom, good example, and guidance. Paul describes us as "in the world, but not **of** the world."

Together in Christ, we provide a glimpse of God dwelling on earth, and getting God's work done.

This morning's opening collect is wonderfully clear about God's love as the operating principle in this worthwhile, non-judgmental, self-sacrificing life. We prayed, "Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts **your greatest gift, which is love**, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you."

To move into this territory, we need to get beyond our familiar, contemporary, colloquial definitions of love, and go back to the original term. Jesus is not telling us to feel passionate attraction toward those who present themselves as our enemies, nor to feel warm affection for them. He doesn't even suggest that we are **to like** the people who injure us, who oppose, threaten, or persecute us. The Greek word used for love in this passage is **agape**. It means unconquerable benevolence. It means **the invincible determination to seek the other's well-being and joy**. It is precisely the kind of love that originates in our Heavenly Father, that Jesus embodies, and is freely offered to any and all. It is not based on our worthiness, or whether we deserve it, or as part of a reciprocal deal.

The command to love the unlovable expresses what it looks like when our lives are fused with God's life. God enables us, in Spirit and power, to demonstrate invincible good will toward everyone, including undeserving family, neighbors, and associates, **because that is how God acts toward every one of us**.

Please bear with me to look at the parallel phrase in Matthew's version of this sermon. When Jesus tells us all, "Do not resist an evil doer," he is telling us **not to join an antagonist on his or her aggressive terms**. He is not telling us, ever, anywhere, to be passive, and to let evil carry the day. Though one comes at us with base hostility, insults, and the determination to do us harm, we are taught **not to mix it up with them on the terms they have brought to us**. Vengeance, and "getting even" are, everywhere, natural human reflexes. Composure, reframing, and redirecting the conflict so that it may possibly be peacefully resolved is the unnatural, godly response. That means that we will often absorb another's anger and endure another's injury. We may need to outlast someone's hostility, or to persist through numerous irritants. But **we are forbidden to join the aggressive one in the intent to demean, deride, to despise, or destroy**.

Christians, like our master and leader, know that it is possible, with God's help, to initiate gracious composure in the face of rudeness and disrespect. We reset the terms of the conflict as those who are more interested in healing than in wounding.

Our motives—by God's grace—will be God's motives: to want, and as possible, to assist the unkind person's progress toward health, sanity, well-being and joy. And Jesus has already led us, and encouraged us, in these steps of mature character and spiritual integrity. He has already shown us how it is done. And he won't leave us as spiritual infants, in natural and endless spirals of natural hostility and revenge. He directs, us, "follow me."

We might go through life singing, "Precious Lord, take my hand..." but when we look at the hand, we see that it is often clasped onto old baggage. We reflexively cling to anger, bitterness, resentment, dragging the old hurts from our past into the present. Loving our enemies will

always entail forgiveness. The Greek word, to forgive, means ***to release from my grasp***. Forgiveness entails releasing others—certifiably guilty others--into God's grip, trusting that God is better able to sort out all the issues of judgment than we are.

(Bring up a volunteer. Pry each finger from the handle with a word: "***I release her to you. I release him to you.***" Say the words, just for practice.) Once we have entrusted those who trouble us to God's justice, mercy, and authority, we are free again. Open hand; open heart; move on to fulfill God's design.

Be God's children; be holy; be complete; demonstrate to others the same kind of gracious care that God shows to you. These are not impossible for God's children. With God's help, the words Archangel Gabriel spoke Mary are true: "nothing will be impossible with God."