



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

## Blame It on God! Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

All of us know the parable of the Good Samaritan and, at least in theory, agree that it teaches us an important life lesson: we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Granted, we often get hung up on whether it means that we have to stop and offer help every time we see someone needing help on the side of the road or we can play it safe and get them help by making a call on their behalf. Most of the time, I forget that the point of the story is that the person who stopped to help the Jewish man who had been robbed and beaten and left to die was a Samaritan, a person the Jewish man would have likely despised. Admittedly, I spend more time thinking about whether I should give a few dollars to the guy who stands at the top of the exit ramp on Winstead Avenue than I do about recognizing people I don't like and who probably don't like me as my neighbor whom I should love.

If that plain and simple parable gives us enough to chew on for a lifetime, why in the world did Jesus have to go further and say something like what Luke tells us in chapter six of his gospel? Just listen:

“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.”

Luke 6:27-38

Was Jesus serious? Does God really expect us to take a blow and welcome another one? A long time ago, I learned the phrase “self preservation is the first law of nature,” and I have seen it played out in every aspect of nature—plants, animals, and humans. Jesus, however, seems intent on being self-sacrificing in every way. Are we to passively stand (or lie) by while other people beat up on us, take our possessions, and take advantage of us?

Earlier we heard part of the story of Joseph and his brothers after they were reunited in Egypt. We all remember Joseph with his multi-colored, long sleeved coat. His brothers were so jealous of him that they threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and faked his death so their father would not know what had really happened to his favorite son. In the portion of the story we read this morning, the brothers have gone to Egypt to buy food to get them through the famine. Joseph, who has become second in command to the Pharaoh, is responsible for all of the supplies that were stored up for seven years in anticipation of the seven years of famine. He reveals himself to his brothers who, understandably, are shocked and afraid for their lives. Joseph offers forgiveness for what they did to him so many years ago and, in a twist we do not expect, blames it all on God, saying that while his brothers intended to do him harm, God had a plan that brought them to that very moment. “This is all God’s doing,” he told his brothers. “We’re good.” And the family was reunited in Egypt.

So when you arrive home one evening with two black eyes, no coat, no shirt, no wallet, no car, and your bank account emptied . . . just blame it on God! You offered the other cheek. You didn’t chase down the guy who stole your purse. You didn’t call the cops on the woman who picked up your keys where they had fallen on the ground and drove off in your car. You didn’t even notify the bank when you discovered your online account had been hacked and all of your money transferred to an account in Russia. Well done, good and faithful servant! God is proud of you!

Is this what Jesus expects of us? Does being a good Christian boil down to letting everyone take advantage of us until we are left beaten, bloodied, penniless, and homeless—as he was? Should we honor, not the Samaritan man who stopped to help, but the saintly man in the ditch who was robbed, beaten, and left for dead? Is he the one Jesus really wants us to model our life after?

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at one and the same time the simplest and most complex teaching we will ever hear. The Christian life is at one and the same time the easiest and most difficult path to follow. Being a follower of Jesus is at one and the same time the most fulfilling, joyous, life-giving experience we can ever have and the most demanding, self-sacrificing, way of life we could ever choose. “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly” Jesus said, (John 10:10). He also said, “No greater love has anyone than this, that you would lay down your life for a friend” (John 15:13).

I wonder if our difficulty in understanding passages like the ones we have mentioned this morning is the perspective from which we read them? When I hear the parable of the Good Samaritan, I always put myself in the place of one of the three people who comes upon the scene and finds the man in the ditch. Unfortunately, neither of the clergy types—the priest nor the Levite—come off looking good. Both have important things to do in service to God and cannot be delayed by someone who might already be dead or could be bait for the robbers who are hiding behind a rock. In the end, I doubt the man in the ditch cared who helped him. He was grateful to be saved.

We admire Joseph for his exceeding compassion for his brothers and his extravagant forgiveness toward them. We hope that we would also be as magnanimous. We forget how spoiled and lazy he was as a boy and how he took advantage of the love his father had for him and his little brother Benjamin. They were the sons of his beloved wife Rachel for whom Jacob had worked fourteen long years to pay her dowry. How do you think the ten older boys felt, knowing their mother Leah was not their father’s first choice or first love? Do you really blame them for throwing their pesky younger brother in a pit, especially when he showed up in the wilderness wearing a fancy coat which was not at all the attire a shepherd would wear? And what of the Egyptians who had worked hard for seven years to grow and harvest the food which Joseph wisely stored for the lean years ahead? When the famine arrived, Joseph did not open the storehouses so that people could get their rightful supplies. He made them pay for it with what money they had. When the money was gone, they traded their valuables. When their valuables

were gone, they traded their land. Joseph took advantage of the Egyptian people in the name of the Pharaoh. Do we really want to be like Joseph? And yet, his brothers were grateful for the provisions he provided and the forgiveness he offered.

When I hear Jesus talk about turning the other cheek, I am usually the one who feels the sting of the palm against my face. I never consider that I am sometimes the one who does the slapping.<sup>1</sup> I usually see myself as the one being asked to give something to someone else, but might I be the one who takes advantage of other people? Could I be the one who wants and takes and enjoys at the expense of someone else? Most of the time, I figure that I am the worker who shows up early in the morning and works all day and is justifiably upset when somebody else begins work at the last hour and gets paid full wages. Could I be the worker who actually gets the long end of the stick? I have to admit that sometimes I am the lost sheep which the shepherd finds at the expense of the other ninety-nine. I am often the sinner to whom God is extravagantly merciful!

Have you seen one of those books that is actually two books in one. You open the book and read a story that ends midway through. Then you close the book, turn it around, flip it over, and there is another story that you read to the middle of the book. The Gospel is a lot like that. We read what Jesus says and know that it is true, but to fully understand it, we have to turn it over, flip it around, and read it the other way. This is what God does with our lives. God doesn't want any of us to get slapped once, not to mention twice. God doesn't want anyone to take what we have and leave us destitute. God doesn't want us to be attacked, robbed, and left to die. God does not want any of those things to happen to us—or to anyone else, for that matter! If those things do happen, however, God does want someone to come by and help us. And if we come upon someone in similar need, God wants us to help as well.

If we hear this passage—or any other passage of scripture—and get hung up on the particulars, then we are like the scribes and the Pharisees who lived by the letter of the law and often completely missed its spirit. Jesus doesn't want us to get slapped twice, but neither does he want us to start swinging at the other guy. There is a better way to reconcile our differences than fighting. Jesus doesn't want someone to steal our things, but neither does he want us to give our possessions greater value than human need. Jesus does not want us to turn a blind eye to theft and corruption but neither does he want us to

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<sup>1</sup>T. Denise Anderson, "Living by the Word: February 24, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany," *The Christian Century* (January 30, 2019), 18.

ignore the basic needs of people around us. Jesus does not want us to allow lawlessness and injustice, but neither does he want us to think that we are so righteous as to have the privilege of passing judgement on everyone else.

What if, instead of hearing Jesus' words as a command to do the impossible, we heard them as an invitation to do something phenomenal? Instead of a demand that we do something absurd, what if they are a promise to do something remarkable? Instead of an insistence that we follow a new set of rules, what if Jesus is inviting us to imagine what the kingdom of God is really like and then to live it?<sup>2</sup>

I mentioned that many years ago, I learned the phrase, "self-preservation is the first law of nature." It was spoken in a play of sorts and the speaker was trying to get a man to betray his friends for information he wanted. The man refused, pointing to a higher law which calls us to sacrifice self over betraying others. Jesus knew that self preservation is a natural instinct. He also knew that we answer a higher calling. As God in Christ came to serve us, so we are called to serve one another.

Living this way is not easy. It does not always make sense. Yet, the alternative is to do things as we always have: to live in a cause and effect world where one good lick deserves another and your offense against me justifies my retaliation against you. Or, we can imagine a world in which anger is treated with compassion, threats are met with conversation, injustice is answered with justice, and hatred is answered with love.

Granted, it is a topsy turvy, twisted, upside down way to look at life. We may get slapped in the process. Someone may take advantage of us. We may lose some of what we have gained. We might also discover that enemies can become friends and adversaries can become neighbors. Swords can be reshaped into plowshares and, instead of war, we learn something about working together to make life good for all people. If we accept the invitation to respond differently to one another, we just might discover that life can be full and complete for all of us. We might just change the direction of our world . . . and we can blame it on God! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>For further insights see: David J. Lose, "Dear Partner: Epiphany 7C: Command or Promise?" *In the Meantime* (February 22, 2019); available online at: <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/02/epiphany-7-c-command-or-promise/> and Karoline Lewis, "Simple Rules," *Dear Working Preacher* (February 19, 2019); available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5291>.

February 24, 2019

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

With all heaven and earth, we sing "holy" to you, and offer our praises, O God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend. You are architect and artist of this world of beauty and wonder, a world filled with good gifts to sustain our lives, to enrich our minds, to delight our senses, and to nurture our souls. You are the One who came to dwell among us and to offer yourself for us, that we might know freedom from sin and death and experience the abundant and joyful life which you intended for us. You are also the Sustainer of our lives in this and every moment, empowering us to love and equipping us to serve.

Holy and Merciful God, from the moment of creation, you have given your Wisdom and Word to guide us. We are able to love because you first loved us. We can imagine a world where all your children live in peace and have enough because your Spirit inspires us to dream your dreams and to open our hearts and minds to your vision. You place within us gifts and talents which allow us to do the work of caring for your creation and for one another. You have promised us mercy that will never abandon us and a hope that will not disappoint through your gentle guiding and your abiding presence with us.

Give us eyes to see the beauty of your promises fulfilled around and within us each day. Give us ears to hear your voice and to respond to your call. Give us minds agile enough to imagine justice for those who have known oppression. Give us hands strong enough to accomplish your work. Give us feet courageous enough to follow you wherever your children need to know of the light and life you offer. Give us hearts open enough to extend hospitality to both friend and stranger, recognizing that in so doing, we welcome you into our midst. And in all circumstances, give us spirits bold and unwavering enough to believe that our worship here and the compassion we extend to those we meet outside these walls can make evident the fulfillment of our kingdom among us. We pray in the name of the Christ who calls us and by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells with us. Amen

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister