

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Saint Dunst's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
20 February 2022
Luke 6:27-38

Every generation has an event that defines it. These events tend to be so profound that people speak about life before the war or after the war, before 911 or after 911, before men walked on the moon or after, etc. Last week Luke began to speak about the greatest event in human history. An event that divided the world into before Christ and after Christ. This event, of course, is the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The birth, preaching, passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God.

For Luke, the coming of the Kingdom is such a fundamental event in the life of humanity that a new set of ethics, a new way of being, an entire new Law and set of rules to live by now govern the citizens of this Kingdom. Whereas in the old system there was a transactional understanding of our relationship with God (we do something for God and God does something for us, we do for others as they do for us, we scratch people's backs and in return they scratch ours...) in the new Kingdom the rules have changed. The new Kingdom requires that we love even those who hate us, just as God loves us even when we walk away from him and resist his grace and love.

Whereas in Matthew, this same sermon is preached on "the mount," In Luke, Jesus preaches his sermon in the "level ground" or, as some translate it, "valley." A study of this word is very interesting. Level ground is often associated in the books of the prophets with "places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning" (Working Preacher.com.) Whereas Jesus in Matthew fulfills and advances the role of Moses, who received his law at Mount Sinai, in Luke, Jesus preaches the same sermon from within the context of his hearers. They live in a world filled with brokenness and dysfunction, in a country under the shadow of the great Roman empire and suffering the weight of their oppression. It is within their brokenness that Jesus announces beatitudes and curses.

In the new Kingdom the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and the disciples of the Son of Man who are the victims of hate and exclusion will be blessed. They will receive the Kingdom, will be filled, will laugh, and will receive a great reward in heaven. On the other hand, the satisfied, the full, those who laugh, and those who enjoy human fame will be cursed. They have already received their consolation, they will be hungry, they will mourn and weep, and they will be treated just as the false prophets were treated.

These reversals in fortune will befall on those who are puffed up and arrogant, those who are so full of themselves that they fail to realize their dependence on God. On the other hand, those who empty themselves of the false self we construct and rely upon, will create enough space in their hearts for the Son of Man to dwell therein. Those who

are hungry for God's love, mercy, and grace will receive it fully. Those who learn to rely less on their own efforts and human agency, and come to accept their need for God's Messiah, will receive the kingdom in abundant ways.

But the citizens of the kingdom cannot expect a transactional relationship with God and the world. There is no full reciprocity that can be expected. We must love not just those who love us, but even those who hate us, those from whom we will never receive anything in return. Jesus said, "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." This is extremely hard, of course. Doing good to those who abuse us and curse us is extremely hard. I once worked with juvenile delinquents in detention centers. I know what being cursed at looks and feels like. The human tendency in those situations is to return insult for insult, injury for injury, threat for threat. But to calmly endure the abuse, serve and even love those who abuse you requires an extra measure of grace only God's Holy Spirit can give us.

The citizens of the kingdom must be willing to offer the other cheek, give the shirt of their backs to those who already took their coats, give to everyone who begs from them, and do to others as they would want others do to them. This is Luke's version of the golden rule, and it is designed to create a peaceful communal existence with neighbors, members of the church, and the various communities where disciples live. A citizen of the kingdom leaves all vengeance to God, and works for peace and unity, takes care of those who are disenfranchised, needy, and desperate.

"Jesus exhorts the disciples to replace old-age qualities of behavior with those that are characteristic of the Realm (Kingdom). Indeed, in so doing, the disciples imitate God who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. To be "kind" does not mean to approve but it means to seek the best interest. God wants even the ungrateful and the wicked to repent and become a part of the movement to the Realm. Indeed, the roots of the word "kind" is related to the roots of the word "grace, 'charis'." (Working Preacher.)

Christ himself provides us a great example of his mandate to love, "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." God himself loves in this way. Even while we fail to love him, obey him, and repent of our sin, God sends his only Son to die for us that we may be forgiven and restored.

Finally, Christ mandates that we don't judge, by which he doesn't mean that the church should not make moral judgements about society's unjust structures and systems, but rather, that we should withhold any judgements regarding people's salvation. It is not our job to determine who belongs in the Kingdom and who doesn't. This job belongs to Christ and to Christ alone. We must be quick to kindness and extremely slow to

judgement, because, at the end of the day, we may be just as much culpable for our sin as those we judge are for theirs. With the same measure we judge others we will be judged.

Now, I know these mandates are extremely hard, but I know that God will give us the strength and endurance to love as he wants us to love. Today, I encourage you to lead an I.N.G. lifestyle. What I mean is that love is not something we have done or something we will do. Rather, it is a lifestyle. An active verb. Something we do every day. We are constantly loving, and caring, and forgiving, and withholding judgement. This is the lifestyle of the Kingdom. And this is what is expected of all of us who follow the example of Jesus of Nazareth. May he continue to bless us. Amen!