

February 20, 2022 Rev. Brent Damrow

SCRIPTURE: Luke 6:27-38

‘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.’

SERMON: “Getting on Board” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Our passage this morning comes from something Luke calls the Sermon on the Plain. But Luke, surprisingly, doesn’t tell us whether Jesus preached or not. At least whether or not Ms. Saunders would have called it preaching. In Matthew’s gospel, Matthew records that the people, after the much long Sermon on the Mount, were astounded. Astounded at his teachings. But I wonder what Ms. Saunders would have thought about that sermon either.

I met Ms. Saunders this past week. Already she’s had a profound impact on the way I think about my own calling and vocation. I met Ms. Saunders in Alford, of all places. I met her on a walk as the snow flew and the wind blew. I was introduced to her, you see, by Bishop Michael Curry in his book “Love is the Way,” which we are using as part of our Lenten series that will start soon.

I have fallen into the habit of listening to great books on Audible while I walk. And this particular book is read by Bishop Curry himself. As I listened to Bishop Curry introduce me to Ms. Saunders, he shared that he learned that to give a sermon and to preach, quite frankly, are not the same thing.

Ms. Saunders was a member of the second church that Bishop Curry ever served, in Lincoln Heights. On Sunday, if she liked his sermon, she would effuse with great joy, “Oh, you preached this morning, Reverend Curry. You were preaching.” But it took him awhile to figure out what she meant. You see, sometimes she made that claim that he actually preached. And whenever she did, she was alive. Her face was on fire. She was enthusiastic.

But he noticed that there were other times, other Sundays, where she came to meet him at the door after worship far less enthusiastically. On those days, she just commented on how good his

robes looked. And on worse days when clearly his sermon was a disaster, she simply wished him a good day, and left the sanctuary.

What he came to understand about what made a sermon preaching or not wasn't that it was filled with impressive information that he had assembled. It wasn't that the stories weren't particularly great, or that the sermon overall was very entertaining. What he came to learn over the years of Ms. Saunders' commentary is that when she said he was preaching, it meant that he touched her in her core. He learned that authentic preaching makes word become flesh, and ends up dwelling in someone's life. That when God preached, God preached Jesus. And that Word came and dwelt among us and became part of us. That preaching changes things. It stirs up things. It comes to life. It leads to a whole new way of being. It leads to getting on board.

So the question is, was Jesus preaching in our passage today? Ironically, Luke, who puts amazement on everyone's tongue and in everyone's heart, whoever encounters Jesus, whether he was a baby or an adult, left amazed. And yet, Luke ends the Sermon on the Plain with no discernible reaction from the crowd at all. Nothing. A big empty silence. Not even a "Well, have a nice day, Jesus." So the question is did Jesus preach that day?

I know this: Nora preached. Double doctor Nora Tubbs Tisdale, the Clement-Muehl Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School, she preached. It was the first time that I sat in Marquand Chapel as a student at Yale Divinity School. And it was this passage that she chose to preach from on that day. She made it clear at this new beginning for those of us who were in chapel for the first time, and that it was a new beginning for anyone gathered there, because not only was it the beginning of a new school year, but any time you come to worship, Dr. Tisdale reminded us, is the chance for a new beginning.

Like so many times I have preached to in my life, I remember this sermon, even though I don't completely remember what she said, but I remember the sermon because it touched me deep inside. The part of all of these instructions that she chose to preach on was a part we sometimes overlook. It was that part in the middle about extending love, extending charity, extending openness, extending welcome to anyone and everyone. Not just the people you already knew or liked. Not just the people that you could expect something from in return. Not just the people that it would be cool to hang out with. But instead, to offer it to everyone and anyone.

There on that first day, for all of us there was that combination of excitement and insecurity. There were people looking for direction. And for me, coming out of a profession and trying to start over in this new strange place called New Haven, this sermon hit me hard and wouldn't let me go.

I left chapel that day and went into the common room. Do you remember when we used to have fellowship hour here in the Jonathan Edwards Room? Do you remember when we used to stand around, and we used to have coffee and talk to each other? Even if we were sometimes guilty of just talking to the people we already knew. But anyway, on the first day of fellowship at Yale, I didn't know anybody, and so I wandered around trying to talk to people. And this sermon of Nora's convicted me and it led me down a new path.

Every single Tuesday night for three years while I was at Yale Divinity School, this sermon convinced me to hold what was called Tuesday Night Dinner. In my tiny apartment whose kitchen was smaller than this communion table, and whose living room was about the size of that grand piano, I opened my doors to anyone who wanted to come, and usually 25 or 30 people would cram in, sitting on top of each other – I wonder how it would feel in these times of social distancing. But the beautiful thing about it wasn't just how it transformed the people who came, but the gift that it gave to me of meeting these new people, of expecting nothing in return. And sometimes days later, being greeted by someone who I didn't know who was just overjoyed by that meal. It led me in a new way of being, of understanding hospitality, of extending it to everyone.

When Jon and I moved here, we tried to do dinners at the manse. Some of you may have been able to enjoy it. We had Nancy, our administrative assistant at the time, issue invitations simply randomly, so that we could get to know everyone. I haven't checked with Jon yet, but I hope that someday we'll be able to go back to that practice of having everyone and anyone who wants to come over for dinner to simply come.

Her preaching that day overcame ways that I was used to establishing friendships. It overcame the boundaries that I used to have to take care of myself. You see, growing up in the Midwest as a geeky, skinny, scrawny gay kid, I learned how to make sure how to pick the people I wanted to hang out with, because it was about who would look out after me. And on this day in this new place where I felt insecurities mounting, Dr. Tisdale said no, invite everyone in, because they will be your blessings. They will be your gift. Because inviting everyone in is that idea that Luke writes about. That Kingdom of God that Jesus says might draw near. Not just for those who are invited, but it might dawn in new ways for the one inviting, too. That her sermon that day was preaching, I know because I still think about it. It still is changing me and offering me new ways of living, new ways of getting on board.

Bishop Curry is the first African-American Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church. Over and over again in his work, he offers this fundamental truth that authentic preaching is simply life based and bound in love, and that such love, when offered freely and indiscriminately, reclaims, redeems and reconciles. It offers the chance for a fresh start, in the hope that we don't have to be what we were. That there is a new way. And that way, Bishop Curry says, is love. It, in fact, is the only way there is.

It is love that Jesus started his preaching to us this morning. Love your enemies, he said. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Turn the cheek, give the shirt off your back. If someone steals, let them keep whatever they took.

Over history, this idea of love changing everything sounds naïve. It sounds like something you would say in a room like this. It sounds Pollyannish. And in fact, that's exactly what somebody called it to Bishop Curry's face one time at a press conference. And he said nothing could be further from the truth. Being Pollyannish is just accepting a system, Curry said, that is broken, and not doing anything about it, being so naïve to believe you can't change it. Love is the only thing that changes the world. Humble, sacrificial love. Don't believe me? Ask the British Empire when confronted with Gandhi. Don't believe them? Ask the Roman Empire. Ask Pontius Pilate.

What is naïve, Bishop Curry argues over and over again, is settling for any system that clearly doesn't work, a system that far too often creates division where a common dream is promised. A system that far too often invites relationship only where it is profitable, easy or comfortable, rather than where it is truly needed.

Love your enemies, Jesus said, because in doing so you change them into friends. I think there's another reason you should love your enemies, though. It is in doing so you change yourself, to remember that -- I don't think -- Jesus thought there was such a thing as enemies. Just brothers and sisters on the road.

Curry wants us to know that following these teachings of Jesus in the way we live transforms them from teaching to preaching. It's strong. It's radical. It stands up to the system in ways that shows everyone just how broken the system might be. It invites the creation of new ways of relationship not based in power or force, but in love and invitation. For that, Jesus maintains, is the Kingdom of God. And friends, it is about to be reborn again.

Jesus, no question, preached that day. And while Luke doesn't say so, at the end of the sermon – truth is, with all due respect to Ms. Saunders – at the end of any sermon you can't tell whether preaching has happened or not. Because with any truth, if it's going to be embodied, if it's going to be enfolded, if you are really going to get on board, well, that all takes time. To see if it goes beyond being astounded to being changed. Going beyond marveling to moving in a new way.

How do I know that Jesus preached that day? Because Luke's gospel continued with the Book of Acts. Luke's gospel about the way Jesus lived his life continues with the story in the Book of Acts which talks about how common people like you and me lived their lives after seeing and hearing Jesus preach. How they found strength through love. How they rooted themselves in a way of living that offered steadfast resistance to any power in the world other than love. And part of the effectiveness of Jesus' preaching, in my mind, is that they didn't just hear what Jesus had to say. These people, if you read the Bible, kept showing up over and over again. They watched how Jesus embodied his own preaching in the way he lived. They saw the strength of love, and how no empire, no ruler, no cross, no height, no depth, no prince, no principality – nothing – can ever ultimately stand in love's way.

We know that Jesus preached, not just because Luke tells us the story in Luke or Acts, or because Luke claims it to be so, but because of how the world responded to those earliest people of faith. They didn't call them Christians. Do you know what they called them? Simply people of The Way. In other words, they saw in those people the radical, powerful, transformative way of love that Jesus preached about in his own life. What they saw in those people who gave everything away, who shared everything, was the power of love that turns the world right side up again.

Friends, the sun is out, the snow is melting. The numbers are down, the pandemic is waning. We are facing a new beginning. We are facing a new chance to go out and approach that world. And how will we do it? Bishop Curry, Mahatma Gandhi before him, Jesus before him, Mother Teresa

too, would say that the only way, the only chance we have of making the future more worth living, richer, deeper than the past, is by doing it in love.

And so, while I'm anxious to hear what you have to say to me on the way out today, whether you like my robes, wish me a good day, or thought you might have heard something, what I'm really more anxious about is not wondering whether I preached today, but wondering will you.

Wondering whether we will go out into this world living what we talk about and practice every Sunday in this church. Will we go out in the world so that people don't call us members of The First Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ in Stockbridge, that they don't even call us Christians, but instead they just say, Wow, those are people of The Way, and I want to get on board. That they won't just say to us, Have a good day. But instead, say what the people said to Jesus: Can I come with you? Can I hold your hand? Can we discover that Way together? The Way that never ignores the past, never ignores harm in any way, never ignores that there is hardship out there. But instead, redeems it all for a better future.

Friends, as you go forth from this place, preach. Give to the stranger, to someone you don't know. Extend love to someone who cannot say thank you. Give to the world, expecting nothing in return. And then you, not me, you will be the preachers for today.

Amen.