

THE GOOD MEASURE

Scripture Reading: Luke 6:27-38

The 3 chapters in Matthew, chapters 5-7, that from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, come from a mountaintop. Matthew is asking us to think of Jesus as a new Moses and his teaching coming from a new Mount Sinai. Luke does some mixing and matching, condensing and spreading out of Jesus' message, though the bulk of it is contained in this one chapter, chapter 6, in Luke. And notice where it comes from: NOT from a mountaintop but from "a level place." That's why it's referred to as the Sermon on the Plain which Jesus delivers eye-to-eye, everyone with their feet on the same ground and sharing a common humanity.

The kids were of grade school age. We lived on a beautiful wide boulevard not far from their school. We had a great patio and a nice big yard to play in. Dee was in the house while the kids and I were in the yard, kicking the soccer ball around, when a car went loudly racing by at double the speed limit.

"Hey! Hey, you! Slow down!" I shouted. Not exactly intimidating, I know. But I know he heard me because he had the top of his convertible down and had to slow down to roll-through a stop sign seventy yards or so from our yard. And because, as he peeled out, he shouted something back. He was too far away for me to really hear the words. "Rah-ler-falla- mixy-blum!" – something like that.

The next day, same time, same situation, Dee's inside and the rest of us are outside playing again and the guy comes zooming by again. This time I lose it. We're not just talking lizard brain. We're talking full Frankenstein – "Ruuuhhhrrrr!" And I take off at a full sprint after this guy.

What am I gonna do if catch him? I'm gonna yank him him out of the car through his open window and Goodfellas this guy in a blind rage.

But, Pastor Steve, you're a nice guy, a gentle guy. No, I'm not – I am Tarzan, King of the Jungle; I am Aries, the God of War; I am Zog, the great hunter of the tiger and the mammoth! That's how I felt at that moment.

So I take off at a full sprint as his car nears the stop sign and make it three whole strides before I pull a hammy and limp around in a helpless circle clutching my leg in pain.

Thank you, God, for smiting me at just the right moment.

Love your enemies

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

Lend to others without expectation of being paid back

Do not judge and you will not be judged

Forgive and you will be forgiven

Give and it will be given to you

This one passage offers the heart of Jesus' moral teaching: love, acceptance, forgiveness, generosity – all of them, interconnected; all of them representing our active response to God's loving invitation to a new life.

This is what I've always wanted to be:

Loving

Accepting

Forgiving

Generous

It's what I've always wanted to be and from the inside out ever since we sang together at Sunday School:

Lord, I want to be a Christian,

In my heart, in my heart

Lord, I want to be a Christian

In my heart...

But there is something deep in my DNA – heck, deep in **OUR** DNA - that explodes and starts an avalanche of body chemistry that overwhelms our reason, and we LOSE IT! We are decidedly NOT Christians in our hearts but become monsters through and through.

Our kids are threatened. Our partners are mistreated. Our parents, our families, our people are belittled. We are struck or spit on or just patronized to.

Boom!

Don't you ever feel that way?

Maybe that's more a "me" problem than something you experience. My father could be set off into a rage by little things, particularly by his own helplessness in the face of any kind of mechanical challenge or household project. And a Packers' loss would spiral him up into fury and spiral him down into depression.

Okay, now it sounds much less like a DNA problem – something inherent to our humanity – and more like a personal issue; needing to cool down and not indulge ourselves in self-pity or self-hatred. Sometimes it's hard to draw that line between genetics and behavior, the human condition and our own neurosis.

Regardless... we're broken people, all of us together and each of us in our own way. We're hurt and apt to hurt others if we don't receive healing. We're miserly and hard-hearted if we don't know grace. We're resentful and withdraw into self-pity or strike out at others if we don't experience and practice forgiveness. We're judgmental and fearful of the other because we're so afraid of not being loved and accepted.

We're broken, all of us together and each of us in our own way.

A true story came out of a small town in Spain a few years ago. A man had a bitter argument with his young son, Paco. The next day the father discovered that Paco's bed was empty - he had run away from home.

Overcome with remorse, the father searched his soul and realized that his son was more important to him than anything else. He wanted to start over. He went to a well-known store in the center of town and posted a large sign that read, "*Paco, come home. I love you. Meet me here tomorrow morning.*"

The next morning the father went to the store and there, God be praised, his son was waiting for him. The two of them were reunited in a tearful embrace. But the father noticed something else – there were six other young boys named Paco in the store, other boys who had also been broken from their homes. They were all answering the call for love, each hoping it was his mother or father inviting him home with open arms.

That's us, yearning for forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, and loving acceptance. And not just the first son but all seven of them – that's us, needing it again and again and again. *"How many times should I forgive someone,"* Peter asks. *"Seven times?"* *"Not seven,"* Jesus answers, *"but seventy times seven..."* A forever posture of forgiveness and loving acceptance. That's what we need, we broken people. And, clearly, that's what we're called to offer others, all the other broken people.

Love your enemies

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

Lend to others without expectation of being paid back

Do not judge and you will not be judged

Forgive and you will be forgiven

Give and it will be given to you

What is Jesus telling us? Certainly, he's challenging our behavior, but what frightens me is that Jesus might think that we are perfectible, inside and out, heart, mind, and behavior like I so piously sang in Sunday School. *"Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,"* Jesus says in another place. It frightens me because I find Jesus' standards to be so hard for my broken as to be nigh unto impossible.

Gail O'Day, a Christian Ethicist from Eden Seminary, was fond of telling us as churches that we need to worry less about loving one another than simply being able to stand one another. I wonder if that's the perspective we need to have in approaching the heart of Jesus' moral teaching. More human. More earthly. More eye-to-eye, moving from a shared humanity than a pronouncement from the Mount.

Beverly Harrison, a ground-breaking Feminist Theologian and Ethicist, wrote an article that continues to shape my thinking: "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love." Anger, she reminds us, roots us in the reality of our experience of injustice and begins to equip us with the strength and energy to right wrongs. Not running out like an idiot chasing a car, but finding courage, determination, and partners in our calling to work for justice. Beverly Harrison might counsel us to use our anger as a blessing without giving way to violence and demonizing.

The experience of the saints in our congregation who have been involved in the Restorative Justice prison ministry have taught us that accountability must be paired with forgiveness before there can be reconciliation.

I'm giving away my things

And it turns out to be

As much of an occupation

And as much fun

As collecting them was.

This is from a poem by Elise Maclay from “Green Winter: A Celebration of Old Age.”

*I browse among my friends the way
I used to browse in shops.
I try to decide who should have the cameo
I wore as a bride, who would like
My Chinese vase. I go through closets and drawers
And am amazed at what I find.
So many objects. I am ashamed
To have so much when so many have so little...*

At the end of the poem, after giving and sorting and giving some more, she writes,

*... Funny, I thought I'd feel a sense of loss
With fewer of my things around.
I don't.
I feel exhilarated; free.
Is this why You told the rich man to sell his goods?*

This is generosity brought down to earth, generosity received and generosity in sharing.

This isn't about perfection after all, is it? This is plain speaking, eye-to-eye, down-to-earth advice about graceful living and faithful loving.

*Love your enemies
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
Lend to others without expectation of being paid back
Do not judge and you will not be judged
Forgive and you will be forgiven
Give and it will be given to you*

Now this begins to feel more reachable, doesn't it? Soren Kierkegaard tells this parable:

A man was walking down the street and saw a beautiful sign proudly displayed in a shop window. “*Pants Pressed Here,*” the sign said. So the man walked into the shop, walked up to the counter, took off his trousers and handed them to the clerk.

“*Why did you give me your pants?*” the clerk asked.

“*I want them pressed,*” the man explained.

“*Oh, we don't press pants,*” the clerk told him. “*We sell signs.*”

I know what we Christians say we are. I know what we advertise ourselves to be. But who are we really? How do we live our lives?

Love, acceptance, forgiveness, generosity – isn't that what we are all about? Isn't that what we want? Isn't that what **everyone** desperately wants and needs to receive? That's the life Jesus calls us to in our Gospel Reading: a life of love, acceptance, forgiveness and generosity.

It's a good life; a good measure is what he calls it in that verse I love:

A good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over, and put into your lap!

Such an active image for an active faith:

A good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over, and put into your lap.

Do and say that with me:

A good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over, and put into your lap.

This is a verse to warm the heart in gratitude.

This is a verse to delight the mind's imagination.

But more than anything, this is a verse to get the blood pumping, to set legs moving and hands working in service.

Do and say it with me again:

A good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

This morning I'm inviting each of us into the life of the good measure. It's not perfection, it doesn't mean that we are all suddenly transformed. We still need healing, feel anger, are called to be accountable, and struggle just to be able to stand one another. But here on earth, in all our humanity, we can have lives where love, acceptance, forgiveness, and generosity are received and are given; the life of the good measure:

A good measure: pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

Amen.