

Message for February 20, 2022

Luke 6:27-36

Something that I have long found fascinating is how much scholars and archaeologists are discovering about what life was really like for most people back in Jesus' day. Sometimes we like to think that people back then lived lives very much like ours, minus of course all of the modern conveniences and technology. This however simply isn't true. Most people who lived in what we call the Holy Land back then lived in conditions resembling that of a Third World country today.

To begin with, most people lived on the edge of starvation with crop failure always a very real possibility. But even when the crops were good, most people still couldn't get ahead. Most of them by far were farmers but they didn't own their own farms since virtually all of the land was owned by the great landowners who rented it out. Rents were extremely high, but the people had no choice but to pay them. The people though weren't just oppressed by their landlords; they also had to pay a compulsory Temple Tax to support both the Temple and the religious establishment in Jerusalem. As if this wasn't enough, there were also the Romans as well; the people didn't just have to pay taxes to their conquerors, they also had to obey them. If a Roman soldier for example ordered anyone to carry his heavy pack for a mile, then that person had no choice but to stop whatever they were doing and do it.

Oppressed by the Romans, the establishment in Jerusalem and the landlords, life was incredibly hard. And if a person could not pay their taxes, then the solution was simple enough. They, their spouse and/or their children would be sold into slavery to pay the debt. To add to the misery, there was also the ever-present threat of violence. There was for example a group of men who were called the Sicarii. They got their name from the razor-sharp curved knives that they carried hidden in the folds of their clothing. To the Sicarii the only good Roman was a dead Roman and they waged a war of terror against the Roman occupiers assassinating both soldiers and civilians alike. Of course, the Romans retaliated and the result was an endless cycle of violence and hatred. Truly life for most people back then was not like life for us, living as they did in a society that was characterized by poverty, oppression, violence, and hate. And

with all this in mind, what Jesus had to say to them in the Sermon on the Plain was truly shocking.

“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the face turn to them the other cheek.”

We have probably heard these words so often that they have lost their power to shock us but imagine for a moment that we were sitting in the field that day and heard Jesus say these things. Love the landlords, the priests in Jerusalem and even the Romans? Treat them the way you wish they would treat you? Pray for them? Surely Jesus had to be kidding! Surely, he didn't really mean these things! Maybe he was just trying to sound religious and spiritual! But mean it he did, and this demand to love *everyone* is one of the things that distinguishes Christianity from all the other great religions of the world.

One of the greatest scholars of world religions in days gone by was a man named Huston Smith. He said that most of the world's great religions have a lot in common. Most of them for example state that people ought to obey God and help those in need. But, said Smith, there is one thing that sets Christianity apart from all the rest and that is the command to love our enemies. To love our enemies, whoever or wherever they may be, makes Christianity different from all the other great religions of the world. If we are honest about it though, this demand that we love *everyone* is not something that we really want to hear. Many of us in fact may well be like the elder in this true story.

It was the custom of a church down in Georgia for one of the congregation's elders to offer a brief prayer right after the minister finished the sermon. The prayer was supposed to focus on the message of the sermon and on one particular Sunday the minister had preached on today's scripture passage. The elder's prayer in response to the sermon was short, honest and to the point: “Lord”, he said, “we heard your word today. And we don't like it”.

If we are honest too, we may well decide that we really don't like Jesus' words in today's scripture passage with his demand, and even command, that we love everyone, forgive everyone, treat everyone as we wish they would treat us, and even pray for them. And because we don't really like to hear these things, we can and often do come up with every reason possible as to why we

can't do these things. One of our greatest reasons or excuses of course is to say that it is simply impossible for us to live like this. Perhaps Jesus could but he was the Son of God! He was perfect but we most certainly aren't! Why we are only human after all! No one can really do all of these things! But if or when we are inclined to think this way, we should remember the story of Ruby Bridges.

It was back in the early 1960's and a judge in New Orleans had just ordered that that city's schools be de-segregated; no longer would the white students have their schools, and the black students have theirs. A six-year-old girl named Ruby Bridges was the only black child to attend one particular previously all-white school, and to say that she was not welcome would be an understatement. Day after day when she showed up for school, she was greeted by a howling mob venting their hatred and yelling obscenities. In fact, when she arrived at school she had to be escorted in for her own protection by big burly marshals. This went on week after week but one day a teacher caught a glimpse of the little girl as she was escorted in and noticed that the little girl's lips were moving. Being curious, the teacher asked Ruby what she was saying; was she talking to the people in the crowd? "No", said the little girl, "I wasn't talking to them. I was just saying a prayer for them". "But why do you do that?" asked the astonished teacher. "Because they need praying for", came the reply.

Imagine for a moment being in her situation and praying for a mob of people, all of whom were screaming their hatred of you. It almost sounds impossible and yet that is what that little six-year-old girl did. Ruby Bridges quite literally lived the Sermon on the Plain by turning the other cheek, loving her enemies, and praying for them. That little girl sought to follow the example of Jesus himself and by doing so, reminds us that while it can be very difficult and very demanding to live the Sermon on the Plain, it is not impossible. We don't, for example, have to retaliate and say something nasty back when people say things that hurt us. Perhaps we cannot like everyone but we can certainly love everyone, remembering that by love we simply mean giving others the same respect, courtesy, and consideration that we wish they would give us. And we can certainly pray for everyone too. In fact as a person once said, prayer is the surest way of coming to like those whom we initially don't like; how can we possibly continue to dislike a person if we sincerely pray for them and ask God to bless them and keep them? Ultimately we can't.

In the Sermon on the Plain Jesus took the ways of the world and turned them inside out and upside down. Turn the other cheek, love your enemies, and pray for them. It is easy to dismiss these words as being the ideals of an other-worldly dreamer out of touch with the 'real world' and so reason that we are free to ignore them. That however would be a mistake. Jesus really meant what he said, and just imagine what life would be like if more of us took his words seriously instead of casually dismissing them as impossible. Why life would truly be nothing less than the Kingdom of God here on earth; life as it was and still is meant to be.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we once again come to you in prayer on this, what is for many, the middle day of a long weekend.

We thank you for what it is that we remember and affirm this weekend: our families. We give you thanks for our loved ones, and we pray for your blessing upon them, that they may be safe and well. We pray this day for families that are struggling, not only economically but emotionally as well as the pandemic has raised the stress level for so many people.

We thank you that some of the restrictions are now being lifted and that there is a growing sense of normalcy. We pray for those in positions of authority; grant them the wisdom to make the best decisions possible for the sake of all. We especially pray for the authorities in Ottawa as they seek to bring about a peaceful resolution to the protest in that city.

We pray for a peaceful resolution in the crisis over Ukraine, and we also offer up our prayer for all the other places of this world where there is so much violence, tension, hunger, disease, and suffering, even if they rarely seem to make the news.

We pray this day for the sake of healing in the lives of all who are ill, and especially those whom we know and love.

This past week we witnessed another incident of senseless youth violence in the GTA, the horrific killing of a student in a school, and we pray for our

society itself and the safety of all. We pray for all the victims of crime and violence, and we pray too for those who don't appreciate or care about the consequences of their actions, not just for themselves but also for the lives of their victims and their families.

We look at some of the things happening, both near and far in the world around us, and we remember the teaching and example of your Son. We realize just how far we are from your kingdom here on earth, so help us then to remember that your kingdom, the Kingdom of God, only becomes a reality when all of your children really try to follow your Son's teaching as given to us in such as the Sermon on the Plain. Help us to do our best to be the people and to live the lives that you have called us to, secure in your love, compassion, and forgiveness at those times when we fail to do so.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen