

Sermon – Luke 6:27:38
David R. Lyle
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“Plain and Simple?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I generally prefer to save quotations for later in the sermon, but the words of Vaughn Crowe-Tipton, chaplain at Furman University, have been living in my head throughout this week, and seem as good a place as any to start. Dr. Crowe-Tipton writes, “Congregations respond to this text in the same way my children respond to seeing cooked spinach on their plate at dinner. No matter how much I explain the nutritional value, no one around the table really wants to dig in.” Having three children, I know how he means. We can talk to our children about how good it is for them to love each other, to forgive each other, to share everything all the time, and to live by the Golden Rule, but it only gets us so far. It seems so simple on the surface, but then real life gets in the way, and we might as well be extolling the virtue of broccoli. Yes, it’s good for us. We *know* that. It doesn’t mean we want to eat it. The problem, which we might as well name at the beginning, is sin. *Their sin, our sin. Your sin, my sin.* Which, come to think of it, sounds like the most depressing unpublished Dr. Seuss book one could imagine. The idea of loving an enemy sounds good until we see one standing before us. Treating one another as we would want to be treated works well until we are treated poorly, disdainfully, as lesser or less than. And then? Well, all bets are off, buddy. In response to sin, our sin kicks in. The Golden Rule becomes heavy, leaden: Do unto others as they *have* done unto you; better yet, strike first.

2. What seem to be such simple teachings offered here on the plain seem meaningless in the real world. They can't quite get traction. The human heart, as we heard last week, is a devious thing. So what, then? Is Jesus squandering his time with the crowds offering little more than hyperbole? No. And we know this because the words of Jesus ring true in a way that supersedes our experience to the contrary. We don't quite recognize the world he's describing, but it sounds like a more real world than ours, even if we can't quite locate it on a map. And because we can't find this truer Kingdom, Jesus brings it here to us. If we were left with this Sermon on the Plain as our only encouragement, we would only be further lost. But the truth of these words lies in promise that before Christ compels us to follow, he walks this way of life himself. Throughout his ministry and to the cross. As he walks the way of sorrows, he loves his enemies: Judas, Herod, Pilate, and – yes – Simon Peter, the denier. Struck, he turns the other cheek. Stripped, he gives up all he has. And to a world that doesn't know to beg of his abundance, Jesus literally gives them, us, everything. Jesus – God enfleshed, God among us – does unto us as he would have us do unto God. In spite of the fact that we have failed in our doing unto God. Even so, God loves us and, in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ, God saves us for something new.
3. After graduating from seminary, I moved to Scotland. Given the chance to live abroad, there were many reasons for heading to St. Andrews, but partly it came down to the fact that I don't easily learn foreign languages. In Scotland, at least, they speak English. Ha! If you believe that, I'll gie ye a skelpit lug! The language was almost the same as my native tongue, but also something completely new, different, wonderful. So it is as we are raised in Christ. Words and teachings that seemed impossible to understand or live out are now simply the only sensible way to make sense of our lives. Here, living today in the Kingdom that will come, Jesus' teachings on the plain become real to us. It is no longer a call to do the impossible, but to resist the evil of this world with the power of the next. Jesus does not address oppressors

- here; it is a given, it seems, that oppressing others has no part to play in God's reign. No, he's talking to resurrected citizens of the Kingdom who live in this world. And how are we to deal with violence, injustice, oppression, and evil? As Jesus did. Not by giving into weakness, but by showing that non-violence is stronger than violence. To be clear: This does not mean that Christians are called to stay in or suffer under violence or abuse. It means that our resistance is an inversion of the powers of this world, an inversion that exists only because God in Christ has inverted death and unleashed life.
4. When evil strikes, turn the other cheek. This does not mean silently accepting suffering. In the ancient Near East, if you wanted to strike someone, you used your right hand. If you were to hit someone of lower standing – like, say, one of those new Christians – you would use the back of your hand. They weren't worth the palm. How to resist? Offer the other cheek also, and make them choose between ceasing their violence or using their palm and declaring you their equal. If you were in debt, anything could be demanded of you – even your coat. Well, if your coat is demanded of you, give the scoundrel your shirt, too. Custom dictated that you weren't allowed to leave someone unclothed at the end of the day; it was simply too inhumane. So, by giving the shirt along with the coat, you made your oppressor choose between breaking custom and incurring shame, or giving you your clothing back. These are ways Jesus encourages us to invert violence for the sake of peace, with the hope of forgiveness and new relationship. Repaying violence with violence will only ever purchase more violence. Only through inverting violence can peace be found. Only in death – our death in Christ – can life be found. This is the life that fueled Dr. King and so many others. This is this life that allowed Pope John Paul II to forgive the man who attempted to assassinate him. This is this life that empowered Desmond Tutu and others to enact forgiveness and avoid retaliation in South Africa after the end of apartheid. It is this life – Christ's life in us – that calls us to go and do likewise.

5. Of course, as the grand conflicts of human history play out, so too do our everyday lives. Sin sadly is nowhere more manifest than in our closest relationships – in our friendships and families, in our church and even in our marriages. Often this is simply due to proximity; we are sinners, and will naturally sin against those closest to us. So it has always been. And no one over the last 3,500 years would have blamed Joseph if, more than twenty years after his brothers had sold him into slavery, he had not forgiven them. But Joseph, with a grace beyond human capacity, sees God’s hand in all of this. He knows that while he would be justified in condemning his family, he would also thereby lose his family. So he forgives them. Incredibly and impossibly, Joseph forgives them. His family, once lost to him, is knit back together. The future, once closed by the sin of the past, is opened by the power of God’s love. We, too, need the power of forgiveness in our families. If you’ve ever been at a wedding that I’ve officiated, you’ve heard me give twelve words to the newlyweds: “I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me. I love you.” The world would have us throw up our fists at one another. But Christ opens up our resurrection hearts to each other, the Word giving us new words to speak to one another – words of a future built on forgiveness, of life built out of death. To ask for forgiveness. To grant forgiveness. This is how we enact the Kingdom in the name of the One who gave everything for those who were once his enemies, but are now and forever forgiven. And that’s better than cooked spinach any day of the week. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.