

February 24, 2019 – Genesis 45:3-15, 1 Corinthians 15:35-49, Luke 6:27-38

Christianity is considered by most to be a fairly normal, rational religion, as religions go. Even those who don't believe in Jesus would say that it has many positive attributes. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of law and order in our society. The admonition to “love your neighbor” is a good and valuable virtue. The verse we read in our Gospel lesson today, “as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them,” has been codified as the Golden Rule in our culture.

There's so much that has been labeled as normal and acceptable in Christianity that I think we forget how much is absolutely insane. And I'm not talking about miracles or other divine intervention. I'm talking about the rest of our Gospel lesson for today.

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. To the one who strikes your cheek, offer him the other one. To the one who steals your cloak, give him your tunic too. Give to everyone who is in need. Lend to everyone who asks and then don't ask for it back.

What Jesus says to us today runs contrary to every single ounce of common sense. There's nothing normal about this. There's nothing rational about a religion that tells us to cast aside every bit of self-preservation we have and let the world walk all over us.

And it's probably for that very reason that many churches and many believers just don't like to address passages like this at all. They dodge it entirely. Or would prefer to water them down to something less extreme.

Convince themselves that Jesus doesn't actually mean “love you enemies.” He just means “don't completely hate your enemies.” That Jesus doesn't actually mean “give to everyone who begs you.” He just means “give to a reasonable number of charitable causes.”

But Jesus doesn't really give us much wiggle room here. Not when he's telling us to invite abuse upon ourselves. Not when he's telling us to be generous even with those who steal from us.

It's a hard lesson to hear. But then he does something even more confusing. He tells us to have this outrageously irrational selflessness. And then says that same, very rational sounding verse I gave you before, “*As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.*” As if that summarizes everything he's just said.

Now, I don't know about you, but I would never expect anyone to treat me the way that Jesus commands us to treat others. If I struck them on the cheek, I would expect to get slapped back. If I stole their coat, I would expect them to rip out of my hands. If I borrowed money from them, I would expect them to demand that I repay it.

But that's actually misreading the verse. Jesus doesn't say, “As you EXPECT that others would do to you, do so to them.” No, he says, “*As you WISH that others would do to you, do so to them.*”

Imagine that you're a king and can do anything you want. Have anything you want. That's the world that I want you to create... for your worst enemy.

Yikes. We're right back in crazytown, aren't we? The Golden Rule doesn't sound so golden when it means giving away all our gold, does it? And yet, that's exactly what Jesus is saying here.

And he can say it with such boldness and enthusiasm because... that's exactly how he loves us. And his love for us defies common sense. It is completely irrational. Completely selfless. Completely beyond our expectations.

Because we are born as enemies of God. Who strike God on the cheek every time we break his commands. We are born as thieves. Who steal away the life he gave us and use it for sinful purposes. There is nothing about us that is trustworthy, obedient, or righteous in any way.

We're really no different than Joseph's brothers in our Old Testament lesson. Remember Joseph and the coat of many colors? Whose brothers became so jealous of him that they stole his coat, threw him into a pit, sold him into slavery, and then faked his death to cover up their crime. That's how God sees us. As traitors and enemies.

Joseph went through so much pain, so much hardship, so much suffering because of his brothers. And yet, irrationally, selflessly, without an ounce of common sense, he forgives them.

In fact, he doesn't just forgive them. He tells them that God let them put him through all this pain and suffering so that he could help them one day. So that after stealing everything away from Joseph, he could turn around and give them the food they needed to survive a famine.

Joseph's love for his brothers is an example of the love that Christ shows us. A love so great, so selfless, so irrational, that even as he hung on the cross, he looked down at those who crucified him and say, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* A love so great, so selfless, so irrational, that even as we take everything away from him by our sin, even his very life, he says that today he will give to us paradise itself.

Jesus says near the end of this Gospel reading, *"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful as your Father is merciful."*

He's talking about us, there. Be kind, because God is kind to you, even though you are ungrateful and evil. Be merciful as your Father is merciful to you, even though you don't deserve that mercy.

So does that mean we're off the hook? Jesus was just talking about all this crazy "love your enemies" stuff because he wanted to tell us how much he loves us... but he doesn't actually expect us to do that, right?

Wrong. He does. He very much does. But it's not something that happens simply because we try harder. You'll never love your enemies or give to everyone who begs from you simply by saying, "Well, Jesus commands it, therefore I have to do it."

Because it is irrational. And it does defy common sense. And it will mean casting aside every bit of self-preservation. Which means the key is to look at this earthly life from Jesus' perspective and realize that maybe your "self" isn't worth preserving.

Jesus' focus when he went to the cross wasn't on saving his life. He was focused on losing it. Knowing full well that there was a resurrection waiting waiting for him on Easter morning.

Paul takes the same attitude in our Epistle lesson. *"You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."* These earthly bodies that we try to preserve with such anxiety and desperation are nothing compared to the heavenly bodies waiting for us at the resurrection of all flesh.

*"What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. Is it sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."*

So who cares if someone bruises your cheek? God's going to give you a new one. Who cares if someone steals your coat? There won't be a need for coats in the new heavens and the new earth. Who cares if you give away all that you have? God has promised to give you a kingdom that lasts forever.

The things of this world don't seem quite so important when you know that there's a better world waiting for us. So why cling to bitterness and hatred? Why cling to the stuff you can't take with you? Why care about anything in this world, except sharing that love that you've been shown in Christ Jesus?

Because that's the only thing you can take with you. On the last day, when the trumpet sounds, and Christ returns, the one and only thing that will come with you from this earthly life to that heavenly life is the people you told about Jesus Christ and his love for them.

That good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over that will be put into your lap? That is the generosity of our God. Who doesn't just share his love and grace with a select few. But, through us, shares that love with all the world.

"So then draw away your hearts from all pleasures base and hollow; strive to share what He imparts while you here His footsteps follow. As you now still wait to rise, fix your hearts beyond the skies." Amen.