

*1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50*

*Luke 6: 27-38*

Our scripture from Luke comes from the “Sermon on the Plain” or “Sermon on a Level Place.” If this wording sounds familiar but slightly off, great, trust your instincts, this is Luke’s version of Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” which might sound more familiar to you. As we know with Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount,” there are many phases and few discourses that comprise the entire sermon, which takes up three chapters. Luke’s version is not as long as Matthew’s; it’s about a quarter of the length of Matthew’s sermon, but is set up in a similar fashion. Luke’s version of the sermon has five main parts to it, and our portion on loving our enemies is the second part in this five-part mini-series. The first part comprises of Luke’s version of the beatitudes, our lovely blessed are statements, and then some “woe oracles” like “woe to the rich, woe to the full” etc. In response to the beatitude statements and woe oracles, we come to Jesus’ precursor to the “golden rule” where Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us... wait, what?

So I’m left wondering if Jesus set up these teachings in this order for a reason. Because one of the main teachings from this section on loving our enemy is that we are to embrace a Christian reciprocity, in other words, we are called to seek love in action over seeking vengeance or revenge on those who have done us wrong.

If we look back at the beatitude section that starts in Luke 6:20, Jesus says “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled,” and on and on. Then Jesus says, “But woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who are laughing now,” and on and on. And I’m curious. Could Jesus tell that people were starting to think about revenge and human systems of justice around the “woe statements?” Could he already see the wheels turning and needed to stop them in their tracks? I would certainly be in the same boat if I heard Jesus say, “woe to Big Pharma who keeps raising prices of insulin, epi-pens, and other necessary life-saving drugs.” After hearing that, I would 100% need the reminder that I am called to “love my enemy” and not to seek revenge or hurt them as they have hurt me, because that is a very human and valid feeling to have.

Regardless of why Jesus gives us this calling, he gives us this calling nonetheless. So what does it mean to “love my enemy”? Does it really mean to “forgive and forget” as most people claim it says? Or to let those who abuse continue to abuse and love them despite being deeply hurt? Maybe these are some of your initial thoughts too, and they are good ones, albeit scary ones, to have. However, I can say with utmost certainty that though

Jesus is calling us to love our enemies, Jesus is absolutely NOT calling us to be abused, mistreated, or harmed in any way.

Instead, Jesus is calling us to a more nuanced love, an actionable love where we pray that our enemies realize their harmful ways and are able to repent and live a life closer to where God calls each of us. Rev. Melinda Quivik, a pastor and liturgical and homiletical scholar, writes what I believe touches at the heart of what Jesus is trying to tell us with loving our enemies. She writes, “Love of [our] enemy means living in the hope – and acting toward the possibility – that your enemy’s life can be conformed to the goodness God desires for all people.” So our call to love our enemy is not a call to let them do whatever they want without accountability, rather it is a call to act in a way, out of love, where our enemies can be transformed to live the life that God calls each of us to live.

As I wrestle with what this actionable, accountable love of my enemy might look like, I am reminded of one of the keynotes that Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis gave during APCE, our Christian Education conference that was just held in Chicago. In her keynote, she talked about how God is still speaking to us and calling us to see those around us and what is going on with them. She was specifically speaking about loving our neighbors, not our enemies, but as she talked I was left wondering about the language we use for “love our neighbor” and whether it would make more sense at this point to say “love the stranger” instead. Other than seminary, and a couple of years in college, I have never known my neighbors. I certainly don’t know my neighbors at my apartment complex here. By this simple language switch, we flip from a phrase that speaks of loving what is known (or even partially known) to loving something that is completely unknown to us. This switch to the unknown makes this act of love an even greater risk. There is something safe about loving those that are known, even if only partially. That same risk is present when we are called to love our enemy.

Further in our passage, Jesus takes “love our enemy” to a different analogy by talking about how it’s not enough to love those who already love you or to give to those from whom you expect to receive love back. That is staying within the same safe category as simply loving your neighbor. Instead, Jesus tells us once again to love our enemy and to lend, expecting nothing in return. Act and give with a love that is risky, a love that extends to those unknown, a love that may not be returned in the ways we expect or want.

This call to love our enemies is meant to make us bristle, to make us wonder, to make us stop and go “wait, what!” Because all of these reactions will cause us to investigate, dig deep, and start to transform ourselves and our thinking closer to God and Jesus. This transformation is part of what Paul alludes to in 1 Corinthians 15 when he talks about our physical bodies transforming into spiritual bodies. Similar to a seed that is planted and blooms into a flower, or a caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, we too, will experience a slow transformation from our physical bodies to our spiritual bodies.

Now, this isn’t to say that our physical bodies mean nothing and that we should stop caring for ourselves in the pursuit of attempting to attain spiritual growth and experience. That’s not what Paul was getting at with his distinctions between the physical and spiritual, rather Paul is trying to make a distinction between our lives without Christ and our lives with Christ when it comes to the resurrection. In the Hellenistic era, when Paul was writing, there was this belief that our bodies were disposable and useless after life, that only our souls were

## *Do I Really Have to Love My Enemy?*

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immortal. So Paul's use of the phrase "spiritual body" was to counteract that narrative that we wouldn't have an eternal body, and instead encourage the people of Corinth that we would in fact have an eternal body.

Paul doesn't go into the specifics of what that transformation looks like, but I imagine it is very similar to what a caterpillar goes through. Now I'm not a biologist, but what I remember from middle school science class is that a butterfly has four life stages. The first being the egg, next is the larva (also known as the caterpillar stage), then the pupa (or chrysalis stage), then finally we have our beautiful butterfly. I remember as a little kid being taught that the chrysalis stage was when the caterpillar wrapped itself in a little cocoon and napped and all these magical things happened, then suddenly the caterpillar was a butterfly and it broke forth from its cocoon ready to go be the cutest little butterfly it could be. What we didn't talk about was that during this chrysalis stage, the caterpillar is undergoing a difficult and kinda gross process that includes ooey-gooney-ness, an exoskeleton being removed, and much much more. It is not the sleeping beauty-like process that I remember from elementary school.

I imagine this is what our transformation is like from our physical bodies to our spiritual bodies. It requires being vulnerable, removing some of the hardened parts of ourselves, and undergoing a long-term overhaul of ourselves. A caterpillar could stay in their chrysalis stage for several weeks before emerging as a butterfly.

As I continue to wrestle with what it means to "love our enemy" or to "love the stranger", I become more and more confident that our transformation to our spiritual bodies is through this tough, mind-boggling work, and this work doesn't have to be done alone. In fact, Paul reminds us that the resurrection is not an individual act or event, rather it is the work of a community. So if you're sitting in the pews right now, or listening at home, and thinking "wow I cannot do this", take heart that we are in this journey together. When you're thinking "but no, I want retaliation, I want to be angry, and I certainly do NOT want to act out of love", reach out to a friend or a trusted confidant and process those emotions together. Time and time again, we see in our scriptures and stories how much better people do when they have someone to lean on and do this hard work with, so who are we to say that we can do it alone now? This is an incredibly difficult transformation that Jesus has called us to do, but we have one another to lean on, to gain strength from, and to go day-by-day with. So lean on one another, and maybe love your enemy a little bit, too. Amen.