

**Series: The Words of Jesus**  
**Today: Words about Love in Human Conduct**  
**Text: Luke 6:27-36**

**A Communion Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, October 5, 2008**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Of all the words which Jesus spoke, the words of our text this morning are some of the most challenging. At our Early Word Bible Study on Wednesday, Jack Houdeshel called them Christianity at the graduate level. *“Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you.”*

Most of us find it difficult to love the people we know and like or the ones who know and like us. The idea of loving someone who is our enemy takes loving to a whole other level. I am reminded of an old Irish prayer we heard a few years ago when we were traveling there on sabbatical leave. For most of us, this is about the best we can hope for when we hear Jesus say, *“Love your enemies”*:

May those who love us, love us;  
and those who don't love us,  
may God turn their hearts;  
and if He doesn't turn their hearts,  
may he turn their ankles  
so we'll know them by their limping.

On this Sunday when we acknowledge that people all over the world are gathering at the Lord's table, what greater challenge can there be than to love people who do not think like we think; who view the world differently from the way we have been taught to view the world; and who may actually view us as the enemy just as we view them as the enemy. How can we love the Osama bin Laden's of the world? How do we

love the neighbor next door when all they seem to do is make life difficult for us? How do we love the people in our lives that make life miserable?

We would do well to begin with the word which Jesus uses for love when he gives this instruction. On many other occasions you will recall we have said that the original Greek has four different words for love. *Eros* is the description of physical passion shared between two partners who care deeply for each other. *Phileo* is the feeling we have for those who are nearest and dearest to us. *Storge* is reserved for family members. *Agape* is the active feeling of benevolence we are to have toward another person; that no matter what that person does to us, we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his/her highest good. (Wm. Barclay, DSB, p. 78).

When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he uses the word *agape*. It is impossible for us to love the enemy like we love our friends or our families, but we can wish for them the highest good; the best that God might want for them. Perhaps this is why Jesus becomes very specific as to the ways to address the enemy we fear: Do good to those who hate us; bless those who curse us; pray for those who abuse us.

### **Do Good to Those Who Hate Us**

The first words of Jesus on love in human conduct were not spoken as a matter of foreign policy, and in an age of terrorism it is hard for us to want to do good to those who hate us. However, Jesus calls those of us who claim to be his followers to adopt the ethic of love rather than the ethic of hate. In a world where our fears of the enemy are fanned, perhaps his message needs to be considered again.

According to a poll conducted in January, 2006, by the Terror Free Tomorrow organization, doing good is a very effective way to improve how Muslim countries view the United States of America.

In May of 2003, research indicated that only 15 percent of people in Indonesia—the world’s most populous Muslim nation—had a favorable view of the U.S. However, in December of 2004, you will recall the tsunami which killed 250,000 people and devastated Indonesia. In the year that followed, humanitarian aid poured into the affected areas from the U.S. and other Western nations.

As a result, a January, 2006, poll showed that Indonesian people with a favorable view of the U.S. had nearly tripled, jumping to 44 percent. In addition, information from the well-respected Indonesian Survey Institute showed that “support for Bin Laden and terrorism has dropped to its lowest level since 9/11.” Finally, the ISI reported that Indonesians with a “very unfavorable” view of the U.S. had fallen to just 13 percent—down from 48 percent prior to the tsunami. [source: Tom McCawley, “U.S. Tsunami Aid Still Reaps Goodwill,” *Christian Science Monitor* (2-28-06), p. 12]

The words of Jesus were not meant as foreign policy, but that doesn’t mean they don’t work. *“Do good to those who hate you.”* Perhaps we would do well to ask our candidates for higher office what those words mean to them.

### **Bless Those Who Curse Us**

He also encourages us to bless those who curse us. Such a command requires us to take a different view of our enemy. Instead of the enemy, perhaps we need to understand the behavior which we deplore having its roots in the unmet need of the person who would do us harm.

A colleague of mine tells the dramatic story of the day a 31-year-old woman, burst into the hospital nursery at USC Medical Center in Los Angeles, wielding a .38 caliber handgun. She had come gunning for a nurse whom she accused of stealing her husband. The woman fired six shots, hitting her target in the wrist and stomach. The wounded woman fled, and her assailant chased her into the emergency room, firing once more.

There, with blood on her clothes and a hot pistol in her hand, the attacker was met by another nurse, Joan Black, who did the unthinkable. Black walked calmly to the gun-toting woman—and hugged her. Black spoke comforting words. The assailant said she didn't have anything to live for, that Staten had stolen her family. "You're in pain," Black said. "I'm sorry, but everybody has pain in their life... I understand, and we can work it out."

As they talked, the hospital invader kept her finger on the trigger. Once she began to lift the gun as though she would shoot herself. Nurse Black just pushed her arm down and continued to hold her. At last the woman gave the gun to Joan Black. She was disarmed by a hug, by understanding, by compassion. Black later told an AP reporter, "I saw a sick person and had to take care of her."

Jesus Christ looks upon us in a similar fashion, as persons sick and broken inside, in need of his care. And it is his embrace that disarms us. I am not sure I would have Joan Black's courage, but I cannot deny the words Jesus speaks to his disciples calling them to bless those who curse us. [source: Tom Tripp, *Leadership*, Vol. 15, no. 1]

### **Pray for Those Who Abuse Us**

Finally, Jesus tells his followers to pray for those who abuse them. Perhaps this is the most difficult thing to do, and yet it may be the most important. When we pray for those whom we view as the enemy, two things happen: We realize we are totally dependent on God for the outcome, and we begin to see our enemies through the eyes of love instead of the eyes of fear. We see them as God sees them instead of what our fears speak of them.

Nikolai Velimirovic, was a Orthodox bishop who spoke out against Nazism in the early 1940's. Because of his protests, he was arrested and taken to the Dachau concentration camp. While he was there, he wrote this prayer:

*Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them. Enemies have driven me into your embrace more than friends have. Friends have bound me to Earth; enemies have loosed me from Earth and have demolished all my aspirations in the world.*

*Just as a hunted animal finds safer shelter than an un-hunted animal does, so have I, persecuted by enemies, found the safest sanctuary, having ensconced myself beneath your tabernacle, where neither friends nor enemies can slay my soul.*

*Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless and do not curse them.*

### **The Invitation**

It is impossible for us to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us as an act of the will. It must be an act of surrender. As we recognize that by our own power we cannot do what Jesus has asked of us, we are

thrown back on our relationship with him and we realize that he didn't just talk the talk. He also walked the walk.

It is at this table that we remember that as he suffered and died for the sins of the world, he did exactly what he asks us to do: He did good to those who hated him; he blessed those who cursed him; and he prayed for those who abused him. We are invited to receive the gift of his body and blood so that we may be strengthened for our journey of faith.