

February 23, 2025
The 7th Sunday after Epiphany
Year C
Luke 6:27-38
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

A Strong Word

Loathing, unadulterated loathing, for your hair your voice your clothing, let's just say—I loathe it all. (*Wicked* “What Is this Feeling?” Stephen Schwartz)

Like many, many people, I saw part one of the musical, *Wicked*, in the movie theater over Thanksgiving weekend. As surprising as this may be, since I'm someone who really likes musicals, I knew very little about *Wicked* before I went to see it. I have never seen it live, I've never listened to the cast album, and I didn't even have a clear idea of who Ariana Grande was before I went to see the movie. I knew that *Wicked* was connected to the *Wizard of Oz*, but that was about all I knew.

I have to say, while I certainly enjoyed the movie, there was a long stretch of it that made me feel very uncomfortable. It was the stretch that started with the song, *Loathing*, when Galinda, the pink and pretty and popular girl turned the whole school against the green-skinned Elphaba.

Now, let me be clear, the loathing the two main characters felt toward each other was mutual. They both sang the word, “Loathing.” They both loathed everything about the other, hair, voice, clothing. But in the school that the girls attended, Galinda had power and Elphaba, because she was different, because she couldn't blend in with the crowd, did not.

And so, there was a long period at the beginning of the movie, where Elphaba was completely isolated from the rest of the school community, because she was loathed by the popular girl. She was bullied by the whole school. Galinda's hatred of Elphaba actually gained her popularity, the whole school took her side, while Elphaba's loathing of Galinda left her eating alone, doing everything alone. Outcast.

Loathing. Hatred. It's a powerful thing. I'll bet that many of you were taught that hate was a strong word and encouraged not to use it, encouraged to replace it with words like dislike, or have a distaste for or take offense at. I tried to find out when the phrase "hate is a strong word" came into favor, but I couldn't find its origins.

But regardless of how strong a word "hate" is, it's the word Jesus uses in our gospel reading for today.

He says, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you..." (Luke 6:27) He spoke those words to his disciples, to those who were following him as he traveled from village to village, as he preached and taught and healed and cast out demons.

He spoke the words of our gospel reading today, just after he spoke the words of blessing and woe that was our gospel reading last Sunday. In last Sunday's gospel reading we heard Jesus flip things on their heads, telling his hearers that those who were hungry, mourning, poor, and hated, reviled, were blessed, and announced woe to those who were rich, full, happy, and well-respected.

Today, we hear the continuation of Jesus' upside-down ethic as he tells his disciples, the people who were following him:

To love their enemies—he says this twice (Luke 6:27, Luke 6:35)

To do good to those who hate them (Luke 6:27)

To bless those who curse them (Luke 6:28)

To pray for those who abuse them (Luke 6:28)

To turn the other cheek (Luke 6:29)

To give the shirt off their backs (Luke 6:29)

To give to everyone who begs from them (Luke 6: 30)

And then the golden rule, to do to others what you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31)

He tells them to be merciful, as God is merciful. (Luke 6:36)

He tells them not to judge. (Luke 6:37)

And, for all of you who are following along with the Lord's Prayer Study at First Friday Faith Formation or during the Thursday Zoom sessions, here we go again with *as we forgive those who trespass against us*. Here in today's gospel reading Jesus says, "Forgive and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37)

Jesus talks about forgiveness a lot. He put it in the prayer he taught his disciples, he teaches about it, he tells parables about it. Forgiveness was really important to him.

Now think, for a moment, about Jesus' audience for all of this. They were fishermen and farmers, homemakers and parents, sisters and brothers, construction workers and vine keepers, ordinary people, who worked ordinary jobs, lived ordinary lives, at least until Jesus came and told them that connection with God was the most important thing, the central thing, was vital for life, for abundant life, for blessedness, even for community. What did they need to know about forgiveness and enemies and love?

It's important to think about the times that they were living in, those first followers of Jesus.

They probably knew a lot about hatred, about enemies, about abuse, about being cursed. Because they lived under the Pax Romana. The peace of Rome. Sounds great, right. Peace.

But that peace came at a price.

Peace came at the price of soldiers who marched through their towns and villages, who they met on the roads, who forced Jews to carry their equipment.

Peace came at the price of soldiers who could take what they wanted, when they wanted.

Peace that came at the price of overwhelming taxation.

Peace came at the price of crosses at the intersections of the Roman roads where those who were considered to be a threat to the Pax Romana were hung— as a punishment, as a warning, not to step out of line, not to fight back.

The Jews who were listening to Jesus talk knew what it was to be hated and reviled by an invading force. They knew what it was to be cursed and abused.

Many thought that the Messiah would come and help them fight back, help them fight off their oppressors, would call down the armies of heaven, the whole heavenly host, to send Rome packing and restore the greatness of the kingdom of Israel.

But there was Jesus, healing the sick, casting out demons, showing the extraordinary power the Messiah was supposed to have, but instead of telling the people, the crowds who gathered around him, who hung on his every word, how to defeat their enemies, how to turn their hatred of their oppressors into action, he was telling them how to love. Telling them to love their enemies. To do good to those who hated them. To forgive those who had wronged them.

Hate is a strong word. Hate is a powerful thing. But Jesus was not telling them to use the strength and power of hatred. Instead, he was calling them to another way:

a way of peace that the world cannot give.

a way of love and mercy.

a way of generosity.

a way of forgiveness.

And I have to think that perhaps this was hard for his listeners to hear. After all they knew they what it was to be hated and they probably knew what it was to hate. They knew the strength and power of their anger toward their oppressors.

I wonder if any of them walked away from Jesus after they heard his upside-down teachings, teachings that turned on their head everything they believed about

blessedness, about woe, about power, about strength. I wonder if any of them thought that Jesus was advising weakness, teaching cowardice.

I wouldn't be surprised if some of them did. Because I know that Jesus' teachings are hard to hear and hard to live today. They're so counterintuitive in a world where anger, bullying, hatred, and an us against them attitude seems to be what strength looks like and where power lies.

But here's what I know. In spite of Jesus' hard, Jesus' challenging teachings about love, Jesus' teachings that challenged traditional ideas about what strength and power look like, there were some who listened. There were some who tried to live by these new teachings. There were some who tried and tried again to love, to pray, to share, to forgive and to be forgiven.

And long after the Roman Empire is something we study in history, long after the Pax Romana had ended and been replaced over and over again by the failure of the peace that the world can give, there are still people who are following the way of Jesus.

Here we are. Strengthened by Jesus' Spirit, fed by Jesus' self-giving love, his own body and blood, given and shed for us, still taught by Jesus' words, still sitting at Jesus feet and learning about a new kind of strength, a new kind of power, a new kind of peace, still seeking to live in the upside-down kingdom of God.

And in this world that wants us to learn to hate our enemies, to loathe those who are different from us, to hold grudges and to seek revenge, we are called to live a different way.

Because we know, we can see that hate is a powerful thing. We've been taught that hate is a strong word. But according to Jesus, love is stronger. Amen.