

Being Christian
Luke 6:27-38
February 24, 2019 – Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Wow!!! Did you just hear those instructions of Jesus? Don't be self-protective. Don't judge. Don't condemn. Love everyone; and everyone literally means everyone, your friends and your enemies, those who do good and those who do harm, those with whom we agree and those with whom we strongly disagree. Love everyone. Wow. I've said before, it's hard work being a Christian. It's not easy being a Christian; but this *is* the call of Christ.

I have a few friends, close friends; and for the sake of our friendships they will remain anonymous in this sermon. But I have commented to my wife, that I know them so well that I know all of their proverbial warts; and I love them despite their warts. And isn't that what love, most especially *agape* love is all about. Those of you who know me well, know that I have a few of those "warts," and I thank God that I am loved despite my failings, loved by God, loved by family, and loved by you, my congregation.

Our worship for the month of February has been inspired by Bryan Stevenson's book *Just Mercy*. It's a book that I would highly recommend. Stevenson is a graduate of Harvard Law School who moved to Alabama to defend the rights of death row inmates in the Jim Crow South. He has successfully argued several cases before the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the rights of children, the poor, and minorities. I said it on Martin Luther King Sunday, and I'll say it again: Yes, we have made some progress; but our creed that all people are created equal is still largely a dream, especially for poor people of color.

Friends, I feel very blessed to be born in the United States of America. I was born to a middle-class family. My father did not finish high school; he dropped out a couple months before his high school graduation, because he had a job offer during the depression; and he needed to take that job to help feed his family. No one in my parent's generation attended college; and I was only the second person in my generation to graduate from college. The first was a distant cousin who became a physician. And I stand before you today holding four college degrees, an opportunity afforded to me by a strong family upbringing and some very supportive teachers and professors along the way. I can also be thankful for a significant amount of financial aid. I also know, if I was born in 1953 to a poor black family in Montgomery, Alabama, those opportunities would not have been afforded to me; or, at a minimum, I would have had a very significant up-hill battle to reap them.

Last Summer, I attended a piano technology seminar; and one of the instructors named Erik is a lead technician in Steinway's European division. He

used to live in New York City; but now makes his home in Norway. Erik was singing the praises of Norway's social structure. I asked, "Why? Your taxes are so high." He replied, "Yes, we have high taxes, but we have excellent health care for every citizen. We have an excellent infrastructure; and every Norwegian citizen is guaranteed a college education at no cost to them or their family." So, no; I'm not ready to adopt Norway's government, and I'm not moving to Norway; but I had no argument to claim that the U.S. system is superior, other than to state that I don't want to pay high taxes.

Some of you know that I'm on the Board of Directors of OhioGuidestone, formerly Berea Children's Home and Family Services. Last year, OhioGuidestone served over 20,000 families in twenty-two counties in our state, ranging from Dayton to Toledo, from Columbus to Canton to our home base in Cleveland. While OhioGuidestone is multi-focused, one of our primary missions is service to children and teens with emotional issues, issues that have caused them problems at home and in school, issues that have caused them run-ins with the law. About eight years ago, our CEO came to the Board of Directors and said, "You know we're doing wonderful work; but we're treating the symptoms, not solving the problems. By far the majority of families we see are poor. The emotional issues are born out of poverty; and the poverty is born out of a lack of education." It was out of that conversation the Stepstone Academy was born. Stepstone Academy is a charter school, run by OhioGuidestone in Cleveland's Central Neighborhood, specifically designed to address some of the shortcomings of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and help individual students climb out of the endless cycle of poverty; and, yes, we have a wonderful and supportive relationship with the Cleveland Public School. Now, Stepstone Academy has had some challenges. Two years ago, we had to do a total reorganization in order to improve our "state report card," but we're moving ahead. And I am fully convinced that the only way out of poverty is education.

Friends, I frequently drive down State Route 83 through Grafton, Ohio. There are two major state prisons in Grafton. I drive by and read the signs: "Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation." Sadly, I believe there *may* be correction going on. There *may* be punishment going on. But, there is very little rehabilitation going on. All too often, people leave prison with a poorer outlook than when they entered. There is a lot of punishment in prisons, but there is very little love; and psychologists are increasingly aware that punishment does very little to affect positive change.

Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good for those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." I've said it before, and I fully believe that God loves every human being on this planet; and I often compare that to the love a parent has for a child. No, God does not love all our actions. God

does not love some of the heinous things that have put people in prison. Indeed God does not love the actions of those who hate you or curse you or abuse you; but God still loves the person; and so should we.

Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is more specific: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer the left as well.” The biblical scholar, Walter Wink notes that if someone strikes you on the right cheek, assuming they are right handed, they have probably back-handed you. Whereas the strike on the left, is less forceful. Wink claims therefore, that by offering the left, we are lessening the person’s power. It’s an interesting thought. I’m not sure I totally agree, but I do agree that by offering the left as well we are telling the individual that we will stand up. We will not shrink from them. And I might suggest that, considering the rest of this scripture, we are called not to stand up to the enemy, but rather to stand *with* the enemy.

Friends, have you ever known a poor person who would literally give you the shirt off their back. I have. I have had people offer me gifts, wonderful, meaningful gifts that I was fully aware that they could not afford. In a few cases, I can gracefully decline acceptance; but often, knowing the sacrifice the person made to offer that gift, I graciously accept it in true appreciation. I try to minister to those in need as best I can; but I also must not deny others the opportunity to truly be a Christian.

Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you.” That’s a really hard one for me, your pastor. You might be aware that people regularly come into the church seeking financial assistance; and I am charged with helping those who need help to the limits of our ability without enabling those who simply seek a continual handout. It’s really hard to tell someone you won’t help them; and I always help someone when it’s the first time they have asked for help. Sometimes, we cannot give them everything they ask for. Some have asked for several hundred dollars to pay their rent or to buy a new furnace or to fix their car. We simply don’t have the funds to regularly make large gifts to people we don’t know.

When I am able to help someone who truly needs help, it is a real joy. Still there are others who I help. They’ll be back next month asking for more help. Then in a couple weeks, and, if I continue to help them, they continue to seek more and more help at shorter and shorter intervals. At times they will tell me the most unbelievable stories, stories that are not consistent from one visit to the next. At times they will start to plead or cry if I deny their request. It’s one of the hardest things I need to deal with. So I do my best, and I try to follow Jesus primary command to “do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

And that is “The Golden Rule” – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” You see, it all comes back to those Great Commandments: Love

God; and love your neighbor as yourself. Three commandments: Love God; love your neighbors (all your neighbors); and love yourself.

May each of us seek to follow those commandments; may we encourage others to follow those commandments; may we encourage our church to follow those commandments; may we encourage our nation to follow those commandments; and may we give God all the praise and all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Lead us and guide us,
as we seek to love others,
as we seek to do your will.
Amen.

Rev. Mark Steiger, Pastor
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