

**27** "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28** bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. **29** If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. **30** Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. **31** Do to others as you would have them do to you. **32** "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. **33** If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. **34** If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. **35** But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. **36** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. **37** "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; **38** give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

I was thinking this week about a college professor I once had in undergrad. Anyone who knows me knows I hate math. I'm simply not good at it, never have been, never even wanted to be, if I'm honest. I'm a word person, I love words and writing and even when they tried to trick us word people by putting the alphabet into math and calling it algebra, I still hated it. My brain is just not wired for it. The problem is, I had to pass college algebra in order to get my undergrad degree. So, I made several attempts at it, all which failed miserably. So, I decided I would take it over the summer, with shorter class time and no other classes to take, surely, I could do it. That's when I hit jackpot with a burnt out, tenured professor who greeting us on the first day of class with these words: "*I don't care if I ever see your faces in my class again. Here is the syllabus with the exam dates listed. You probably want to show up for those, but if you don't want to it doesn't really matter. I have already assigned you a grade based on how you looked when you walked in the door this morning.*" That's all I remember about that. But, based on how I looked that morning, I made a "C" in that class. Come on, it was an 8 am summer class and I had an hour commute to get there!

The great news is, I passed college algebra and eventually earned my undergrad degree and had a successful career...the reality is, I still can't do math or algebra. I didn't learn anything. I took the easy way out and I got what I wanted, but is it really right to earn credit for something when you haven't learned anything? That kind of seems to be what Jesus wants to know.

What credit is it to you to experience God's love for yourself and never learn how to send that love out to others? What credit is it to you to do good when you have received good but to withhold it when you haven't? What credit is it to you to give only when you think you will get something in return? What credit is it to you if you take the easy way and not take the path that stretches you, challenges you, or grows you into a more Christlike follower of Jesus?

I think his point is simple: We can be like the rest of the world, like every other sinner out there, and keep our love and good deeds and generosity close to home and reserved for those who love in return...or we can follow Christ and learn how to grow into a life in which our love expands, our deeds become selfless, and our generosity holds no expectation other than to help others.

This is something that is vitally important to The United Methodist Church and one of the things that makes us unique in our Christian faith. When we talk about God's grace, our founder, John Wesley, helped us understand three dimensions of that grace. The first is prevenient grace – the grace that comes before. Prevenient grace is a way of understanding John 3:16 – For God so loved the world. As United Methodists, we understand God's grace is poured out on everyone, saint and sinner alike, or as Jesus puts it in today's text, "[God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Our belief, based on scripture and experience is that God's love is for everyone, even those who don't yet recognize it.

But we also believe, given the time to grow, people will come to recognize God's love. We call this justifying grace. It may be a one-time event, or we may grow into this realization over time, but there is a point in which we recognize and accept God's love for us and understand that we want to be transformed by that love. We want to live differently as a result of that knowledge. We want to become like Jesus, who has loved us through all our unlovable moments and waited patiently for us to notice him.

In our Wesleyan theology, we understand this commitment to becoming Christlike as Sanctifying Grace. Sanctifying means to be set apart or made holy. We are to live a life that is not like the world around us, but one in which we show Christ to the world through us. Now, Wesley also called this "moving on to perfection," and by that he did not mean becoming morally flawless or sinless, he didn't mean being perfect as in free from mistakes or temptations or failure.

What he meant is we are to take Jesus' sermon on the plain seriously and become perfect in love...even when its hard...even when we don't understand it...even when we can find reasons to justify NOT loving...we do it anyway, because that's how Jesus loved us. Because the alternative is that we spend our whole lives being pew warmers, praying beautiful prayers, and accepting and giving love, goodness, and generosity within our circle of family and friends, but we end up with no capacity to love to the depth Christ loves, or do good in the world the way Christ did, or be generous in the sacrificial way Jesus was.

We can be a Christian who gets by with an easy grade and learns nothing, or we can disciple that accepts that we have much to learn and shows up ready to be transformed into someone resembling the master teacher. Sanctifying grace means wrestling with the question, "What credit is it to you if you never take a risk to love someone, or do good for someone, or be generous to someone who has nothing to offer you in return?"

Jesus is saying, love all people, be good and generous as you do. But I think, inevitably, when we love all people, we begin to notice the injustice that comes from systems and actions that lack love. Then what? Are we to just accept it when love is withheld or justice denied? I think what Jesus is asking of us is to love all people and hate injustice.

He says, do not judge but loving and being non-judgmental is no excuse for failing to stand for justice and equity in the world. If we truly love and want others to receive love, we must also engage in practices that are loving and advocate for systems that are just. I think this is what Jesus means when he says, turn the other cheek. Not to stand by while people abuse you, but to stand firm and offer them the other cheek as an act of non-violent resistance. When someone demands things of you that are excessive, find ways to exceed in generosity and shame their greed.

Friends, I'll be honest and say I think this is the most difficult teaching in scripture. To be asked to love our enemies and refrain from judging others when we look and see others doing harm and threatening chaos sometimes feels like a monumental task. If we are honest, we'd rather follow the Jesus who ran into the temple and started turning over tables. Angry Jesus is more relatable! But let's remember, Jesus only did that once, and he did it to call attention to the injustice of the temple system.

Jesus advocates for us to be non-judgmental but what he means by this is that we don't look at anyone as being less than a beloved child of God, despite who they are or what they do. We can lack that kind of judgement and still strive for accountability and action in areas that are unjust and cruel, that lack love and generosity. It's how Jesus can call us to this depth of love and yet still go overturn some tables. We have seen the power of this kind of love in non-violent protests of Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and others who embraced the idea that we can love our enemies and still advocate for justice in the world.

So much of our world is dominated right now with hatred and division and chaos. We see enemies everywhere and it causes our anger and frustration to rise. When that goes unchecked, we start to judge and hate and condemn and this isn't the way of Christ calls us to behave.

My point is this, it is a hard teaching, and we won't get there overnight. We must work at it, show up and listen to one another, see one another, love one another even when we find ourselves frustrated and angry...and somewhere in the midst of that work, we will see just how God loves us when we are unlovable, and how Christ died for us even before our actions made us worth dying for, and how generous are our blessings, considering how little we offer in return...and something in us will shift. We will be able to see ourselves in others and see them in us, see them as God sees them. Maybe then, we can truly learn something about love.

Jesus says our reward for moving on to perfection, gaining God's kingdom, will be greater than we can imagine, but he clearly adds that we will receive what we put out there...the goodness we give is the goodness we get back, the love we give will be the love that is returned, the forgiveness we grant will be the forgiveness we get.

I guess we will know we have been transformed by Jesus, perfected with Christ, when that promise stops sounding quite so scary.