

LENTEN LESSONS FROM LUKE
"ABSURD GENEROSITY"

THERE'S A STORY OF AN IRISH BOXER WHO BECAME AN EVANGELIST.

ONE DAY AS HE WAS SETTING UP HIS TENT FOR A REVIVAL, SOME LOCAL TOUGH GUYS CAME AND STARTED HECKLING HIM.

ONE OF THEM TOOK A SWING AT THE PREACHER AND HIT HIM ON THE CHEEK, KNOCKING HIM DOWN. HE GOT UP AND POINTED TO HIS OTHER CHEEK AND SAID, "*JESUS TOLD ME TO OFFER YOU THIS ONE ALSO.*" SO THE GUY CLOBBERED HIM, KNOCKING HIM DOWN AGAIN.

THE BOXER-TURNED-PREACHER ROSE SLOWLY TO HIS FEET, TOOK OFF HIS JACKET, AND SAID, "*JESUS DIDN'T GIVE ME ANY FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS*" AND HE PROCEEDED TO KNOCK THE GUY SILLY.

THERE'S A DANGER IN READING THESE WORDS LITERALLY OR LEGALISTICALLY.

THE FIRST DANGER THAT I BELIEVE NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED WHEN WE CONSIDER THIS PASSAGE IS THE DANGER TO BE A DOORMAT.

IF WE TREAT THESE STATEMENTS AS LAW, WE LOSE THE FLEXIBILITY TO RESPOND DIFFERENTLY IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS.

TAKEN LITERALLY, THEY ARE, INDEED, THE PROPER WAY TO BEHAVE IN MANY SITUATIONS.

BUT SOMETIMES THESE WORDS ARE COMPLETELY INAPPROPRIATE – ESPECIALLY WHEN WE'RE TALKING ABOUT NECESSARY INTERVENTION TO PREVENT HARM TO ANOTHER PERSON.

THERE ARE CERTAINLY TIMES WHEN RESISTANCE TO INJUSTICE IS THE PROPER ACTION – FOR ONESELF, FOR OTHERS & EVEN FOR THE PERPETRATOR OF THE INJUSTICE.

JESUS DIDN'T INTEND THESE INSTRUCTIONS & CHALLENGES TO BE USED SIMPLY AS A WAY OF AVOIDING DIFFICULT DECISIONS.

THERE ARE CERTAINLY THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED ABUSE IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER FOR YEARS & THESE WORDS ARE IN NO WAY MEANT TO JUSTIFY A CONTINUATION OF THAT ABUSE.

SUCH AVOIDANCE DOESN'T HELP ANYONE INVOLVED IN THE SITUATION.

I THINK IT'S NECESSARY TO GET THAT OUT OF THE WAY SO WE CAN CONSIDER WHAT JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT IN THESE WORDS.

WE CAN LOOK AT EACH STATEMENT HE MAKES HERE – WE CAN CONSIDER EACH CHALLENGE INDIVIDUALLY – BUT I THINK I'D RATHER JUST LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE AS A WHOLE & TRY TO DISCOVER WHAT JESUS IS SUGGESTING HERE.

I THINK, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, JESUS IS CHALLENGING US TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE.

HE'S CALLING US TO A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WORLD – A NEW WAY OF DEALING WITH OTHERS.

THESE WORDS ARE OFFERED FOR OUR OWN ASSISTANCE AS MUCH AS FOR THE ASSISTANCE OF THOSE WE LABEL OUR "ENEMIES."

JESUS KNOWS THAT, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, NO ONE REALLY WANTS TO HATE ANOTHER PERSON & WE LOSE EVERY BIT AS MUCH AS THEY DO WHEN WE FOSTER UNKIND ATTITUDES & ACT IN WAYS THAT AREN'T LOVING.

THESE WORDS DON'T MAKE A LOT OF SENSE, THOUGH, DO THEY?

THIS TEACHING ABOUT LOVING OUR ENEMIES IS REALLY PRETTY RIDICULOUS, ISN'T IT?

HE'S CHALLENGING US TO WHAT WE MIGHT CALL "ABSURD GENEROSITY."

WE'RE INCLINED TO SAY, "MAYBE THAT WOULD HAVE WORKED IN JESUS' TIME, BUT NOT OURS!"

THE TIME OF JESUS – IN THAT REGARD – WAS REALLY NO DIFFERENT THAN OUR OWN.

IN FACT, THE BOOK OF SIRACH THAT'S FOUND IN THE APOCRYPHA AND WAS LOOKED UPON WITH HIGH REGARD BY JEWS WAS WRITTEN A LITTLE MORE THAN A CENTURY BEFORE JESUS.

LISTEN TO WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT DEALING WITH THOSE WHO ARE REGARDED AS ENEMIES:

"GIVE TO THE DEVOUT, BUT DO NOT HELP THE SINNER.

DO GOOD TO THE HUMBLE, BUT DO NOT GIVE TO THE UNGODLY.

HOLD BACK THEIR BREAD, AND DO NOT GIVE IT TO THEM,

FOR BY MEANS OF IT THEY MIGHT SUBDUE YOU;

THEN YOU WILL RECEIVE TWICE AS MUCH EVIL

FOR ALL THE GOOD YOU HAVE DONE."

IF THIS IS THE KIND OF TEACHING THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN ADHERED TO BY JEWS IN THE FIRST CENTURY, THINK OF HOW INCREDIBLY RADICAL THIS TEACHING OF JESUS WAS!

IT WAS AN ABSURD GENEROSITY THAT HE WAS ADVOCATING – SOMETHING THAT REALLY MADE NO LOGICAL SENSE AT ALL!

IT RAISES A QUESTION IN MY MIND & PERHAPS IN YOURS.

WHY WOULD PEOPLE HAVE FOLLOWED JESUS IN THE FIRST PLACE?

WHY WOULD THEY HAVE CLAMORED TO SEE HIM & HEAR HIM IF THIS WAS THE KIND OF STUFF HE WAS TEACHING & PREACHING?

WHY LISTEN TO SOMEONE WHO'S GOING TO TELL YOU TO DO SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE?

SERIOUSLY.

DOESN'T IT JUST MAKE YOU SHAKE YOUR HEAD IN DISBELIEF?

WHY WOULD JESUS HAVE HAD ANY FOLLOWERS AT ALL WITH THAT KIND OF OUTLOOK ON LIFE?

BUT, THEN AGAIN, IF WE ASK THAT QUESTION OF THOSE WHO *FIRST* FOLLOWED JESUS, WE MIGHT LOGICALLY ASK IT OF OURSELVES AS WELL.

YOU KNOW THE KIND OF THINGS JESUS SAID.

YOU KNOW THIS IS SOMETHING HE PREACHED.

IN LUKE'S VERSION THAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING, IT'S FOUND IN WHAT WE CALL "THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN."

IN MATTHEW'S VERSION, IT'S FOUND IN THE MOST FAMOUS SERMON EVER PREACHED – “THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT.”

SO THIS ISN'T SOME HIDDEN, RANDOM THOUGHT TUCKED AWAY IN THE MIDDLE OF A MIRACLE STORY THAT WE THINK WE CAN DISREGARD BECAUSE IT'S IRRELEVANT.

THIS CHALLENGE LIES AT THE HEART OF THE MESSAGE OF JESUS.

IT'S IN THE VERY MIDST OF THIS TEACHING THAT WE GET WHAT WE KNOW AS THE GOLDEN RULE WHEN HE SAYS, “*DO TO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU.*”

SO, BACK TO THE QUESTION OF “WHY.”

WHY DO *YOU* FOLLOW JESUS IF HE'S GOING TO SAY SOMETHING SO RIDICULOUS?

WHY DO *YOU* WANT TO OBEY HIS TEACHINGS IF HE'S CALLING YOU TO OFFER ABSURD GENEROSITY TO OTHERS?

I THINK IT'S PERHAPS BECAUSE WE ALL KNOW THAT'S WHAT WE WANT DEEP DOWN INSIDE.

WE KNOW THAT – MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE – WE WANT TO BE CHALLENGED.

WE WANT TO DO MORE THAN WE'RE DOING.

WE WANT TO GIVE MORE THAN WE'RE GIVING.

WE WANT TO LOVE DEEPER THAN WE'RE LOVING.

WE WANT TO RISE ABOVE OUR BASE HUMAN NATURE & REACH FOR SOMETHING BIGGER & BETTER.

WE WANT ABSURD GENEROSITY TO BECOME A WAY OF LIFE FOR OURSELVES.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING CHALLENGED LIKE THAT IN A RIDICULOUS SORT OF WAY?

I REMEMBER TAKING A GYMNASTICS CLASS IN COLLEGE.

I DREADED THE CLASS BECAUSE I WAS THE KLUTZ OF ALL KLUTZES.

THE OTHER NIGHT, EMMA SUE ASKED ME IF I THOUGHT I COULD JUMP ROPE.

WHAT SHE MEANT WAS, “*DO YOU THINK, AT YOUR AGE, YOU COULD JUMP ROPE LIKE WHEN YOU WERE A KID?*”

I SAID, “*NO, I'M SURE I COULDN'T JUMP ROPE TODAY. I COULDN'T EVEN DO IT WHEN I WAS A KID SO I'M SURE I CAN'T DO IT NOW!*”

WHEN I GOT THE TEXTBOOK FOR THE GYMNASTICS CLASS (YES, WE HAD A *TEXTBOOK* AND IT WAS WRITTEN BY THE PROFESSOR), I WAS TERRIFIED.

I KNEW I'D NEVER BE ABLE TO DO THE THINGS SUGGESTED IN THAT BOOK.

16 WEEKS LATER, THOUGH, I *COULD*.

I WAS DOING THINGS I NEVER DREAMED POSSIBLE BECAUSE THE PROFESSOR REFUSED TO LET ME BELIEVE I *COULDN'T*.

HE CHALLENGED ME & EVERYONE IN THAT CLASS TO DO THINGS WE NEVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE – AND BEFORE LONG, WE ACCEPTED THE CHALLENGE & ROSE ABOVE OUR LIMITED EXPECTATIONS OF OURSELVES.

WHAT A THRILL IT WAS TO DO THINGS WE NEVER DREAMED WERE POSSIBLE.

WE'VE HAD A SAMPLE OF THAT SAME THING OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS IN VANCOUVER WITH THE WINTER OLYMPICS.

FOR MOST OF US SITTING HERE THIS MORNING, WE LOOK AT THE THINGS THESE ATHLETES ARE DOING – WHETHER IT'S ON SKATES OR ON SKIS OR EVEN THE CURLING SHEET – AND WE'RE ASTOUNDED THAT ANYONE CAN DO THOSE THINGS.

AT ONE TIME, THEY PROBABLY WERE AS WELL.

BUT SOMEONE CHALLENGED THEM TO RISE ABOVE THEIR LIMITED EXPECTATIONS OF THEMSELVES & STRIVE FOR SOMETHING MORE – SOMETHING BIGGER, SOMETHING BETTER, SOMETHING GREATER.

THAT'S WHAT JESUS IS DOING HERE IN THIS PASSAGE & THAT'S WHY YOU'RE HERE TODAY.

THAT'S WHY YOU FOLLOW HIM.

THAT'S WHY YOU LISTEN TO HIM.

DEEP DOWN INSIDE, YOU AREN'T WILLING TO SETTLE FOR LESS THAN THE BEST OF WHICH YOU'RE CAPABLE.

YOU KNOW THAT A LOVE THAT GOES BEYOND THE REASONABLE BOUNDS OF LOVE IS SOMETHING YOU WANT IN YOUR LIFE.

YOU DON'T WANT TO LIVE WITH ANGER & TENSION, FEAR & HOSTILITY INSIDE OF YOU.

A MISSIONARY COUPLE WAS ON FURLOUGH AFTER A PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT TIME OF SERVICE IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY.

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THEY HAD BEEN MISSIONARIES, THEY HAD A PLACE OF THEIR OWN TO REST AND RECOVER.

THE WOMAN LOVED THE PATIO AND MADE IT THE FOCUS OF HER DECORATION EFFORTS.

AFTER A FEW MONTHS SOME NEW NEIGHBORS MOVED IN.

THE BEST WORD TO DESCRIBE THEM WOULD BE COARSE.

LOUD MUSIC BLARED DAY AND NIGHT, ALONG WITH FREQUENT OBSCENITIES.

THEY EVEN USED THE FRONT YARD AS A BATHROOM -IN BROAD DAYLIGHT!

ONE DAY THE NEIGHBOR'S CHILDREN SPRAYED ORANGE PAINT ALL OVER HER BEAUTIFUL PATIO—THE WALLS, THE FLOORS—EVERYTHING!

SHE WAS DISTRAUGHT AND FURIOUS.

SHE TRIED TO PRAY BUT FOUND HERSELF CRYING OUT, *"I CAN'T LOVE THEM. I HATE THEM!"*

KNOWING SHE HAD TO DEAL WITH THESE FEELINGS OF HATRED, SHE BEGAN TO PRAY VERY INTENSELY, ASKING GOD FOR GUIDANCE.

A PARTICULAR VERSE OF SCRIPTURE CAME TO MIND – A VERSE FROM COLOSSIANS: *"AND BEYOND ALL THESE THINGS PUT ON LOVE, WHICH IS THE PERFECT BOND OF UNITY"*

IN HER HEART SHE ASKED, *"LORD, HOW DO I PUT ON LOVE?"*

THE ONLY WAY SHE COULD PICTURE IT WAS LIKE PUTTING ON A COAT.

SO SHE DID THAT—SHE WRAPPED HERSELF IN THE LOVE OF GOD!

AS A RESULT SHE BEGAN TO EXPERIENCE A DEEPER LIFE OF CHRIST WITHIN HER.

SHE MADE A LIST OF WHAT SHE WOULD DO IF SHE REALLY LOVED HER EXASPERATING NEIGHBORS.

THEN SHE DID WHAT SHE HAD LISTED.

SHE BAKED COOKIES, SHE BABY-SAT FOR FREE, SHE INVITED THE MOTHER OVER FOR COFFEE—AND THE MOST AMAZING THING HAPPENED!

SHE BEGAN TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THEM.

SHE BEGAN TO SEE THAT THEY WERE LIVING UNDER TREMENDOUS PRESSURES.

SHE BEGAN TO LOVE HER “ENEMIES.”

SHE DID GOOD TO THEM.

SHE LENT TO THEM WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING BACK.

WHEN THE FAMILY NEXT DOOR EVENTUALLY MOVED, SHE WEPT!

SHE SHOWED ABSURD GENEROSITY, AND SHE WAS CHANGED.

AND SO WERE THEY.

FOLLOWING THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS WAS TO HER BENEFIT AS MUCH AS THEIRS & THE LIFE OF EACH PERSON INVOLVED WAS CHANGED AS A RESULT.

I’VE OFTEN BELIEVED THIS TEACHING OF JESUS CAN BE SUMMED UP IN THE PHILOSOPHY THAT SAYS “DON’T LET SOMEONE ELSE’S BEHAVIOR DETERMINE YOURS.”

ALWAYS BE LOVING.

ALWAYS BE GRACIOUS.

ALWAYS BE KIND.

ALWAYS BE FORGIVING.

I KNOW – IT’S RIDICULOUS.

IT’S ABSURD GENEROSITY.

BUT THINK HOW DIFFERENT THE WORLD WOULD BE IF WE PRACTICED IT.

OR, IF THAT’S TOO MUCH TO CONSIDER, THINK HOW DIFFERENT *YOUR* WORLD WOULD BE IF *YOU* PRACTICED IT. AMEN.

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