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Luke 6:27-38

## COOKED SPINACH

Picture in your mind that a plate of cooked spinach is set before you. Now maybe some of you like cooked spinach. But consider a four or five-year old child. The typical four or five-year old child would regard a pile of cooked spinach with absolute revulsion. And there would likely be tremendous protests and resistance to any instructions that they must eat that mound of mushy green stuff.

Jesus' instructions that we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us is, for most of us, cooked spinach on a plate. We do not want to consume it. We cannot imagine consuming it. And we resist consuming it with every fiber of our being. Much like eating cooked spinach may not seem too bad in the abstract, but it becomes something altogether different when the plate is actually set before you—in a similar way, we can get behind the *idea* of loving our enemies. But wait until we have been injured, wait until we must deal with people who wish us ill, wait until we have been betrayed by someone we trusted, and suddenly the idea of loving our enemies becomes incredibly distasteful.

Let us consider first of all the idea of enemies. Most of us do not have comic-book sized enemies in our lives. Our enemies come in more ordinary packages. They are the boss who has it out for us. Or the colleague who always undermines our efforts. Our enemies might be found right within our families—mothers or fathers, siblings, maybe in-laws—who have harmed us or our loved ones, who kicked us out, or who turned others against us. An enemy is not simply an annoying or irritating or difficult person. An enemy is someone who is actively hostile or

antagonistic towards you. And they are part of life. I have always been skeptical when people praise a person for “never having had an enemy.” Really? Maybe it’s possible. But not having enemies is not necessarily a sign of a person’s moral character. After all, Jesus had plenty of enemies.

And I would bet that most of us here today have had or still have people in our lives who could qualify as enemies. We may bear deep wounds from these people. We know that the injury such people cause is real and painful. So let us not gloss over that reality.

And yet, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us. It is important to offer a clarifying word about Jesus’ message. This text has often been misused in the past to keep certain vulnerable or abused people in their place: enslaved peoples, those in abusive relationships, those who are exploited. Jesus was not telling people they should become doormats for abuse.

Instead, Jesus is instructing his disciples about a new way to live with one another. Jesus tells them, “You know the system the world runs on? It is based on score-keeping. It is based on retaliation.” And Jesus gives them, and us, a new system for living in this world. No more score-keeping. No more seeking revenge. No more harboring of hate. No more wishing harm upon others. The only way for us to escape the cycle of harm followed by hate followed by revenge, followed by harm, followed by hate—the only way to escape this cycle is love.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he does not mean the kind of love that is based upon warm feelings and tender emotions. He is not telling us we must *like* our enemies. Instead, Jesus speaks of a kind of love that is an act of the will, a kind of love that seeks the welfare of another. Jesus tells us to love our enemies with this kind of love.

Craig Anderson recalls the time he was an observer at the 1983 Assembly of the World Council of Churches. He recalls that “One afternoon a resolution was brought to the floor calling for an end to the practice of apartheid in South Africa. Before a vote could be taken, a diminutive man wearing a magenta clerical shirt stepped quickly up to a floor microphone. Following protocol, he introduced himself. ‘My name is Desmond Tutu,’ he said. He lauded the motion and thanked the resolutions committee for its work.

“Then in a soft-spoken voice he said, ‘I have only one concern about the declaration. I note the absence of any expression of love for our white South African brothers and sisters, even those who support the existing unjust policy that’s so destructive to my people and our nation. We, of course, want change; indeed, we must have change. But we want our oppressors to know that though we oppose their policies, we wish them no ill. Fairness and just treatment for all people in South Africa is all that we want, and when this policy is eventually overturned, we want to work side by side with all South Africans toward peace and reconciliation in our nation.’”

Craig Anderson recalls, “It was an electric moment. A hush fell over the assembly, and we sensed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Bishop Tutu moved that the resolution be sent back to committee for the inclusion of these sentiments. The motion received unanimous approval.”

Jesus’ instructions to love our enemies summons us to a new mindset, a new framework, a new system of thinking and being and behaving. We will not retaliate. We will not keep score. We will instead seek the welfare of all. Of all--including our enemies.

Why? Why is this something we should do when it is so distasteful, so objectionable? Jesus tells his disciples that we are to do this because, “God is kind to the ungrateful and the

wicked.” God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. And sometimes, sometimes the ungrateful and the wicked are in fact us. That is, after all, the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is it not? When we were enemies to God’s ways, God loved us. When we *are* enemies to God’s ways, God loves us. Jesus came and loved the very people who would hate him, turn against him, betray him, abandon him, call for his crucifixion, nail him to the cross. Jesus loved his enemies. Jesus *loves* his enemies. And sometimes *we are* those enemies.

Sammie Maxwell was in first grade in in North Georgia in 1951 when a classmate declared with great disdain that their first grade teacher was a “Yankee.” Sammie recalls, “I could hardly wait to talk about this with my older sister, Peggy. She was not only my roommate but my chief consultant and confidant. ‘Peggy,’ I whispered as soon as the light went off, ‘how can you tell if a person is a Yankee?’ After some thought, Peggy explained that people who live in the South are called not only southerners but also rebels. Northerners, people who lived on the other side of the Mason-Dixon Line are called Yankees.”

Sammie responded, “I don’t see what all the fuss is about where people live . . . Besides, it would just be too crowded if everybody lived in the South.’ Then Peggy told me that many southerners thought of Yankees as the enemy because of the war . . . I didn’t know which war Peggy meant, so I asked. She thought for what seemed an endlessly long time, then she asked me if I noticed that the black children didn’t ride the same bus as we did. ‘Sure,’ I said. ‘They ride the red bus and we ride the yellow bus.’

“Before I could ask why, Peggy continued: ‘The war was called the War between the States, because the states north of the Mason-Dixon Line and the states in the South were fighting over whether black people could have the same rights and freedoms as white people.’

‘Like freedom to ride the yellow bus?’ I asked.

‘Well, it’s a lot more complicated than that,’ she said cautiously. ‘But for now, let’s just say freedom to ride the yellow bus—and live, eat, work, and go to school wherever they want.’

“With great glee I said, ‘So that’s why the Yankees don’t like southerners—because we want black folks to have what white folks have!’ My sister jumped out of bed, turned on the light, came to the side of my bed, and looked deep into my eyes. Then she told me something that broke my heart. ‘No, Sammie!’ she said with a firm voice. ‘The Yankees were the good guys. For the most part it was southerners who didn’t want the black people to be free.’ Then she turned out the light as quickly as she had turned it on. After a long time, I whispered, ‘Peggy, are you awake?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t want to be the enemy!’ I said.

‘Then don’t be! Go to sleep.’”

How shattering it can be to discover that we can be the enemy! Sometimes we are the enemy in a general way. We are part of a nation or a system that oppresses or harms. But sometimes we are the enemy in a personal way—we are the one acting in a way that hurts or oppresses or demeans or excludes. We are the one with the heart grown hard, the one filled with hate. We are the one who betrays. We are the one who spoke ugly words that cannot be rescinded. We are the one who refuses to acknowledge the benefits we receive from unjust policies and privileges. And God is merciful to us, when we—out of ignorance, out of stubbornness, out of selfishness, out of brokenness—when we are the ungrateful and the wicked ones. Be merciful, Jesus tells us—be merciful just as God is merciful.

Do you remember that plate of cooked spinach—the one we found too distasteful to eat? Perhaps you will also remember a common practice employed by parents all around the world

when confronted with a child who won't eat what is placed before them. The parents tell the child, "Just try one bite." Eating the whole mound of spinach may be too much. But just take one bite.

Loving our enemies, the very people who have caused us so much pain, so much suffering, may be more than we can contemplate. But what if we start with just one bite? One gesture, one attempt, one practice, one prayer? What if we try taking just one bite? Because, according to Jesus, when we do this, when we strive to love our enemies, we will be children of the Most High.