

The Hard Work of Loving and Serving and Growing

Luke 6:27-38

It is my last Sunday as your pastor. We have shared a lot these last 23 months. I want to thank you for sharing your hopes and dreams and allowing me to walk alongside you as we discerned God's way and served God together. I have enjoyed laughing, praising God, and reaching out to our neighbors with you.

I also want to challenge you to remember who you are. Not only are you children of God and loved by Jesus. You are a community of faith that values relationships—relationships with each other and with God. I have heard many stories about how you have supported each other in times of difficulty and need.

Why does FMHPC exist? To serve, love and grow in ever widening circles of Christ's grace. To be a community of faith that shows the world what God's unconditional love, radical compassion, and grace in action looks like.

This is where Luke 6:27-38 challenges us to grow. You are a relational congregation. You have a heart for loving your neighbor. How can you grow and build on your strengths? Your growing edge is to listen to Jesus in Luke 6 when he says "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." This is a hard teaching that asks us to grow in our grace and mercy.

Jesus challenges his listeners to love not as a *quid quo pro*, but rather for the sake of building God's kingdom. To glimpse how revolutionary this "nothing in return" idea is, we need only recall the relentlessly "return-oriented" ways of the world (including our own lives and relationships!). We may treat one another with kindness or respect, but only so long as it's reciprocated. If you love me, I'll love you; if you do good to me, I'll do good to you; I'll give to you now if you'll repay me later; and so on.

And what do we call this kind of love, this free, above-and-beyond, gratuitous giving? We call it "grace." Jesus says, for God "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35). And this is the love Jesus calls us to live out as "children of the Most High" created in God's image: "Be merciful, just as God is merciful" (Luke 6:36). When we love this way, we embody the image of God. This is the love we were made for.

Like any great teaching, this one is vulnerable to distortion. The call to "offer the other cheek," for example, or indeed to forgive or lend without return, can be mistaken to prohibit withdrawing from abusive or exploitative situations. But this confuses love with acquiescence. True love acts to end abuse.

Earlier in chapter 6, Jesus says the poor, the hungry, those who weep will be blessed and the rich, full, and proud will get their due. The crowds are ready to go get their oppressors and give them what they deserve, and Jesus says I want you to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you. They are stopped in their tracks. They think they have God on their side. They realize this loving and serving and growing is harder work than they thought.

What if we took Jesus' words to heart and actually lived them? What if we did not relegate Jesus' sayings in this passage to just aspirations of what's possible but believed them to be activities that might indeed make God's Kingdom possible?

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob