

Take a journey with me to the plain upon which Jesus said these words (Luke 6:27-38), some of his most comforting and most challenging teachings, so important for today. I've entitled this message "**Clearing the Air.**"

Kate

Today's gospel is a continuation of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke that Joel talked about last week. This week, let's go there....You are standing at that level place about 100 feet away from Jesus. You have invited your family and friends to come and they stand with you. Things haven't gone so well for you lately, and you heard about this new teacher who is coming through, speaking, healing, and changing lives. So you thought, okay, I'll hear him, maybe it would help.

As you arrive, Jesus is saying, "Blessed are you who are poor..." His face is gentle and he seems to be looking right at you. "For yours is the kingdom of God." You feel a little hope stirring inside. "Blessed are the hungry now, for you will be filled." Yes, you are hungry, so hungry for life to be different, for justice in your village, which has seen nothing but raised taxes and the rich getting richer. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Yes, this man can touch the soul. "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." **Go Jesus!** And "woe to you who are full now and are laughing!" Yea, man, give it to them! "Woe to you when all speak well of you..." Oh, you are feeling **so much better** already!

As he continues, you move in closer to hear every word. "But I say to you that listen..." Yes, Jesus, I am listening. "**Love** your enemies!" **What?** "Do **good** to those who hate you." Did you hear that right? There's got to be a catch. "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who [hurt] you." The energy in the crowd has suddenly changed. You see some of Jesus' closest followers with their eyes lowered to the ground. They aren't liking this any better than you are. "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also and from anyone who takes your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." Oh my God, where is the justice in that?

People have taken a step back. You take two.

You have heard that his family had recently come out to retrieve him because they were afraid he was losing his mind. Now you see what they saw! What were you thinking inviting all your friends and family to come? You are never going to live this one down. This man is crazy! **Yes...** Jesus is crazy. **Crazy like God.** The One who, as Jesus says, is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked. Who is merciful to all. The One who refuses to hate and will not condemn.

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Love your enemies, Jesus said. Not just tolerate them, put up with them, or co-exist with them, but **love** them. And love is an active verb. It implies relationship. It is not enough to think, okay, I can love them as long as I stay away from them. **No.** That's **not** love. That is **hostile co-existence.** And with these words, Jesus is asking us to **end hostility.** Not just by letting people be, but **by loving** them. Hostility and animosity do not exist in the kingdom of God. The kingdom is where we are all brothers and sisters, all God's children.

Now, you may be thinking, wait a minute, who are my enemies? Do I have any enemies? Enemies are defined as those for whom one feels animosity or antagonism. Now, let's just put aside politics for a moment, where antipathy has run amuck. Let's talk about enemies up close. **Think.** Is there anyone in your life that you avoid talking to? who

you try not to be around? who you complain about, even to yourself? who, if you see them coming in Hannaford, you slip down another aisle? You may think, wait a minute, that's not an enemy, that's someone I don't want to deal with right now! Well, if you don't want to deal with them, you are **notloving** them, are you? But what you are doing is adding to the hostility of the environment. Have you ever walked into a room full of people and sensed "Oh, something is wrong in here." Hostility of any and every kind hangs in the air like smog. There is no benevolent hostility. It **poisons** the air.

Are we not living in a toxic,poisoned atmosphere today, nationally and globally?I believe that every single one of us is less happy, healthy, and whole because of the **ugliness** that we take in every day and perhaps even contribute to. Now, I want to be clear – I am not referring to **anger**. There is a righteous anger (not self-righteous, another thing altogether) but a pure energy that originates in every cell of the body when we sense that something is **very wrong** and needs getting right. Anger is something your body knows before your brain does. This is the anger of one who has been abused, or of someone who has witnessed terrible abuse, such as a child taken from its loving family or whole peoples written off to starvation. This kind of anger is clarifying and motivating. It encourages healing action.

However, the moment that anger morphs into hatred and hostility, it turns into self-righteous anger. And self-righteous anger is not an effective agent for change. It merely poisons the atmosphere where things need to be **made right**. It muddies the air. Hostility simply breeds more hostility. I know that many of us are angry at the way people are being treated and abused in our country and around the world, but the loving use of that anger is as a **motivator** to make change, not as a fuel for hatred. Anger and love can co-exist, actually sometimes they must. But hostility and love cannot.

Yes. Jesus really means it when he says "**Love** your enemies." He is saying "Please, people, clean up the atmosphere! Stop contaminating the environment you live in with animosity and hate." The zealots among his followers wanted Jesus to turn the crowds against the leaders, they wanted **vengeance** and **violence** against those who had devastated the people. **Jesus did not**. He knew

that kind of response would only lead to more of the same. And **we know that too**, don't we? Why haven't we learned our lesson? Is it because we just don't want to love our enemies?

Someone once said that just because the gospel is **good** news doesn't mean it is **easy** news. It is easy to find people who think like we do, share our opinions and values, and, of course, hatreds, and hitch our wagons to theirs and feel so good about ourselves when we are together. Yes, it is easy, but it is **not** living the gospel. It wasn't in Jesus' time, and it isn't now. Jesus **knew** he was asking people to live and love in a way **counter to the usual way, the fallible human way**, of loving their own, families, friends, and allies. He was asking them, **he is asking us**, to live **God's** ways. To be **crazy** like God. To stick out like a sore thumb when everyone else is circling the wagons. To dare get caught in the cross-fire, as Jesus did himself, by **refusing** to hate, **refusing** vengeance, **refusing** to write off any child of God. This radical, thoroughly inclusive love is the **witness** Jesus wants us to give the world.

So, back at the Sermon on the Plain where he is still speaking... "Do to others as you would have them do to you. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." So...decision time...do we take a few more steps back from these words, from this crazy teacher, turn, and go home? Or do we move toward Jesus and begin breathing the new and clean air? Amen.

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