
“Hearing One Another”

A SERMON on Luke 6:27-38 for the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 20 February 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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A baby shower.

How much trouble could a baby shower be?

Most of you know that my spouse is also clergy; Adam is a priest in the Anglican tradition, now serving a parish over on the west side of Vancouver, basically right between the Kerrisdale and Marpole neighbourhoods. Go back a few years ago, though, before we moved here to Canada and the Lower Mainland, and you would have found him in a rather different setting: at a congregation in a small, rural, eastern Connecticut town called East Haddam. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, where Adam served for some 8 years, it wasn't all together unlike our congregation here at Cloverdale United Church, at least in terms of size and age demographics and so on.

A few years ago, there was a time when that congregation was eagerly awaiting the birth of a new baby to one of their active church members. In this era of aging church populations, and in the life of a moderately-sized congregation, having a young expectant mother who was already a very active part of the congregation... it's just not something that happens terribly often.

And so, this was a very exciting time, not just for that particular family, but all around Adam's congregation. With the excitement and joy that was beginning to fill people's hearts, soon enough there came the moment when someone in the congregation started talking about putting on a baby shower. Lovely idea, right?

The Ladies' Aid Society—an organization not unlike our UCW—they certainly thought so. But *then*... one of that group's officers—who, to be honest, had *long* had a chronically recurring case of fear-of-spending-any-money—she started getting worried about the Ladies' Aid Society funding such a thing. After all, if we do it this time, won't we have to do it for all of the other babies coming along?

Now, an objective observer would probably wonder just where exactly this flood of new babies was likely to come from, given the demographics...! But nevertheless, the worry about precedent-setting came, all the same. After all, we know how “church people” can be, right?

And knowing how “church people” can be, perhaps it won't come as a complete surprise that the person who first brought up the baby shower idea was a bit taken aback by the hemming and hawing and, in a bit of a “huff,” decided to have them drop the whole matter. Instead, she was going to throw a baby shower of her own, at her own home instead of the church.

Subsequently, though, the leaders of the Ladies Aid Society got feeling a bit *guilty* about not doing something for the expectant mother. So they decided to go ahead and do a baby shower after all, there at the church.

Therefore, there ended up being not one, but two showers thrown by church folk for this mother, on different dates and at different locations. Some church members were involved in the one, other church members were involved with the other, and still yet other church members

got invited to help with both of them and ended up feeling a bit caught in the middle.

Now, Adam—being the rector of the parish (i.e., the priest, the pastor)—as you can imagine got to hear about all of this for weeks upon weeks, through all the ups-and-downs and backs-and-forths. From all the different sides: from Ladies' Aid folks feeling imposed upon by the situation, from Ladies' Aid folks upset there hadn't been more immediate generosity from their leadership, from the woman heading up the independent shower, from the church member who ended up having to make cakes for both of the showers.

Adam, being a reasonably wise clergyperson and leader, did his best... to stay *completely out* of the situation, other than to lend a listening ear and a pastoral presence to all who came to him. Nevertheless, of course, there were countless emails, many phone calls, a handful of in-person pastoral conversations...

Meanwhile, through all of this, over so many weeks, with so many different people and sides of the story he heard from... and even with his place as the pastor of the congregation and of the expectant mother... that's right, perhaps you've guessed it: Adam never got invited to *either* shower.

But if I may, I'll let you in on a little secret: he was actually quite *fine* with that.

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Like with a baby shower, it would be easy at first glance to ask how much trouble a few simple commandments from Jesus could be. Especially commandments that, for many of us, ring some rather familiar bells. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, offer the other cheek. And even that one echoed across so many traditions—religious and non-religious alike... that one so hallowed that we've dubbed it 'golden': "Do on to others as you would have them do to you." How much trouble could this be?

But then, like the reality of church people being how church people can be, the reality of all the ways these supposedly simple words of Jesus actually can be rather troublesome starts creeping in.

These words of Jesus we've heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke come as the second major section of what we refer to as Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain". The gospel of Matthew likewise has Jesus preaching much of the same words to a crowd gathered around, and in either case, whether Jesus is down on a plain like here in Luke or up on a mount like in Matthew, this teaching comes early on in Jesus' work and ministry. He's been anointed by the voice of God at his baptism by John the Baptist, he's been driven by the Spirit into the wilderness where he gets tested and tempted, and he's re-emerged into the region around his hometown, the region called Galilee. Some of you may remember from a few weeks ago that in Luke's telling of the story, Jesus shows up at his hometown synagogue just to find himself at the wrong end of an angry mob not so keen on what he has to say. He travels around the region, healing and teaching. He shows up at the lakeshore and calls some fisherfolk into a life of being his disciples. And as the crowd of onlookers and followers continues to grow, finally he sits them down and begins to teach, beginning—as we heard last week—by upending our expectations about who the truly "blessed" ones in our world are.

Surrounded by this crowd that was likely *filled* with the poor, hungry, weeping, and rejected ones he's just proclaimed "blessed," Jesus now turns to his first actual instructions to them. If the people who'd started following this healer and teacher were hoping for a typical rabble-rouser or a strong-man-style revolter, they may well have been disappointed by those next words: "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." These sure do *not* sound like the words of someone who's going to lead them to the imperial palace with guns loaded or pitchforks at the ready. For some who were beginning to put their hopes in Jesus' leadership, they were probably wondering why he was now telling them to seemingly roll over and "take it." And so, indeed, for those folks, these words probably caused a bit of trouble in their hearing.

Moreover, in the nearly two thousand years since Jesus spoke these words, they've been *mis-used* to justify all sorts of abusive and oppressive behaviour. Countless women and men who've suffered abuse at the hands of their spouses or other loved ones have been told that they're supposed to turn the other cheek. People who've been falsely accused of misdeeds have been told they're supposed to do good to those who hate them and bless those who curse them. So much trouble, pain, abuse even, when these seemingly so simple beloved words of Jesus end up in the wrong mouths.

But to all those who would so simplistically apply Jesus' words... and to any of us who hear Jesus' words here and find ourselves chafing a bit at commands that seem unrealistic and unreachable at best, and potentially abusive at worst... I would remind us that whenever we *think* we understand what Jesus is saying, that's often right when we need to take a closer look. When we think *we* have a handle on Jesus, that's exactly when we need to think again.

In this case, I'm not so sure that Jesus is trying to lay unattainable commandments on our backs. I don't think Jesus said these lovely and yet lofty things to make us feel even more burdened, weary, heavy-laden.

What Jesus is up to, it would seem, is something rather different.

Not commandment, but invitation.

Not rules to follow, but an alternative way of being in the world.

Not burdens that are going to crush us, but pathways along which we find grace and discover the life and love and grace of God god's-self.

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful," Jesus says. God invites us, you see, to share in God's own life. In Jesus' teaching, the invitation comes to us—the invitation to be as God is, and to do as God does—and in accepting such an invitation, we get to discover life as God lives it.

The particular ways this invitation comes do seem more than a bit countercultural to the way the world normally works. Or even the way we humans—even we "good Christian" humans—think it *should* work. But God's agenda to ultimately to *change* the world, to *transform* the world, to *restore* the world into the fullness of all that God intends for it. And God invites us to join in on that agenda. Jesus is inviting us to seek after maturity and completion and the greater ends of what could be... because *that* is what God is doing in the world, too. God is inviting us as partners to live into, and help make manifest *now*, the great and wondrous things that God has in store for us and all of creation in our ultimate reality.

When we reach these places where Jesus is offering teaching and instruction and even so-called ‘commandment... we shouldn’t see this as the rule list we have to follow in order to avoid divine punishment. Rather, God invites us into a way-of-life because in great love God wants us to experience the life of the divine and to live as God’s beloved, redeemed, restored, holy people now. God knows living into the ways of the kingdom will be a gift for us—and a gift *through* us for all the world. *That’s* what God invites us to be a part of. Hopefully, that’s an invitation we *are* actually quite pleased to receive.

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In just over a week and a half, the season of Lent is going to be upon us. This period of 40 days plus 6 Sundays leading up to Easter can draw us—if we accept the invitation—into a soul-forming journey of cleansing and confession, of deeper discipleship and more-passionate prayer, of simplifying and centering ourselves, our minds, our souls, our lives. But in the same way that Jesus’ words we heard today are neither simply good pointers for being a better person nor burdensome rules we have to struggle to uphold—but instead are God’s invitation to sharing in the very life of God—so too, in this season that’s soon upon us, the journey isn’t simply about self-improvement or taking pride in our own piety. As we worship together over the weeks of Lent, we’ll be listening and looking for God on the move: into the wilderness, past all obstacles, across all barriers, down the highways and byways, and even through death and into new life. As we prepare to enter into this time, I want to challenge you—challenge all of us—to be intentional about how we’re going to accept the invitations of God, how we’re going to place ourselves where we need to in order to meet God as God is on the move, in us, through us, in all the world.

Will you accept God’s invitation to join in God-life?

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.