

SERMON “You That Listen”
OLIVET CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
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Luke 6: 27-38

Love for Enemies

27 ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. * Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Judging Others

37 ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

SERMON “You That Listen”

Do you remember your kindergarten? I remember taking the bus to school with other children from down the street. I have vague memories of sitting in an area surrounded by bookcases for my teacher to read us a story. And I recall having wooden trucks that connected to each other and held wooden blocks that we played with. I remember some of the other students, probably because I still have a class photo. We were 22 students, who looked pretty similar – though with varying degrees of smiles - and our teacher in that black and white photo from 1961.

I liked learning and I liked school and it started way back then. Overall, I have fond memories of my time in that kindergarten class, but also first grade and the other years I spent in that school.

Ruby Bridges started first grade in 1960, in an all white elementary school in New Orleans. She had gone to kindergarten in an all black school and had done well. She was one of 6 black students that passed a test that was required of them, to see if they were appropriate for first grade. You see, in 1960 the school system had to desegregate and all white schools had to start enrolling black students.

Even though her parents were concerned about possible backlash over sending Ruby to an all white school, they thought she would receive a better education there. What they did not expect was the crowd of parents along the walk to the school; 50 each morning and 50 to 75 each afternoon. They were angry, mean, swearing, calling Ruby names, even threatening to kill her. One protestor even held up a black doll in a coffin. Federal Marshalls had to escort Ruby, a first grader, into and out of the school each day.

That first day, Ruby sat in the principal’s office all day. The woman who would have been her first grade teacher quit rather than teach a black

student. Only one teacher in the school, Barbara Henry, agreed to teach Ruby. And Ruby ended up being the only student in the class because the parents of the other first graders refused to send their children to school. Due to fear for her safety, her teacher had her eat lunch in the classroom and kept her inside at recess, away from older students.

Despite all that she went through on an ongoing basis, Ruby was happy in school and at home. She ate and slept well despite the ongoing pressure of getting to and from school and of being isolated from other students. She didn't complain. She even attracted the attention of a child psychologist, Robert Cole, who wanted to get to know Ruby, to confirm that she was really doing OK emotionally.

One day, Ruby's teacher noticed that she appeared to stop and speak to some of the parents. When she spoke to Ruby about it, Ruby explained that she was not speaking to them, she was praying for them. So Ms. Henry contacted Robert Cole and they went to Ruby's house that evening.

Robert Cole wrote that their conversation went like this:

We went to Ruby's home that night, and I asked her, "Ruby, how was your day today?"

She said, "It was okay."

"I was talking to your teacher today and she told me that she asked you about something when you came into school early in the morning."

"I don't remember," Ruby said.

"Your teacher told me that she saw you talking to people in the street."

“Oh, yes. I told her I wasn’t talking to them. I was just saying a prayer for them.”

“Ruby, you pray for the people there?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

I said, “Why do you do that?”

“Because they need praying for,” she answered.

“Do they?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Ruby, why do you think they need you to pray for them?”

“Because I should.”

“Why?”

“Because I should.”

Then Ruby’s mother came into the room. She had heard this line of inquiry, and she said, “We tell Ruby that it’s important that she pray for the people.” She said that Ruby had the people on a list and prayed for them at night.

I said, “You do, Ruby, you pray for them at night, too?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Well, because they need praying for.”

Mrs. Bridges told me Ruby had been told, in Sunday school, to pray for the people. I later found that the minister in their Baptist church also prayed for the people. Publicly. Every Sunday.

I said to Mrs. Bridges, and then to her husband later, “You know, it strikes me that that is a lot to ask of Ruby. I mean, given what she’s going through.”

And they looked at me, very confused. “We’re not asking her to pray for them because we want to hurt her or anything,” said Mrs. Bridges, “but we think that we all have to pray for people like that, and we think Ruby should, too.” And then she looked at me and said, “Don’t you think they need praying for?”

“Yes, I agree with you there,” I said. “But I still think it’s a little much to ask Ruby to pray for them.”

Cole wrote that he was perplexed by this and even spoke to his wife about it. How could Ruby be praying for those people after all they were putting her through?

So a few weeks later, Cole again approached Ruby about this. He wrote,

“Ruby, I’m still puzzled. I’m trying to figure out why you think you should be the one to pray for such people, given what they do to you twice a day, five days a week.”

“Well,” she said, “especially it should be me.”

“Why you especially?”

“Because if you’re going through what they’re doing to you, you’re the one who should be praying for them.” And then she quoted to me what she had heard in church. The minister said that Jesus went through a lot of trouble, and he said about the

people who were causing the trouble, “Forgive them, because they don’t know what they’re doing.”¹ ...

Jesus said to the crowd,

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.”

Those were Jesus’ words in our reading this morning. They were a continuation of his teaching that we heard last week; when he came down from that mountain and preached to the crowd on the plain – a message to level the playing field. They were a continuation of his radical words about blessings and woes, who was blessed and who was in trouble. Jesus starts today’s words from Luke’s gospel with *“But I say to you that listen...”*

Had some found Jesus’ words too hard to accept? Had they stopped listening or had they left? If so, his next words were not any easier to hear. Jesus said we are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us. He does not want us to retaliate if someone hits us. We are to give without expecting anything in return – whether we have lent our belongings or they are taken from us. And we are supposed to behave this way, not with our loved ones, but rather with those we don’t know and our enemies.

And we are not called to behave in this radical way because we are looking to be rewarded. We are not called to live this way because we think it will get us into heaven. We are supposed to act this way

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1985/august-...> The Inexplicable Prayers of Ruby Bridges | Christianity Today

because we are called to be like our loving God. In our lives, we are supposed to become more like the One who created us in love. After all, we are made in the image and likeness of God. We are made to love.

Jesus says, that when we become these people, our reward will be great. He says we will be children of the Most High; because when we do these things, we will become like our God for our God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked and is merciful. We will become children that live and share the love of our Parent, our God.

Love. Do Good. Bless. Pray for. Practice non-violence. Give without expectation. Show Mercy. Do not judge. Do not condemn. Forgive. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Become more like the God who is merciful and loves all people.

Are we still listening?

Ruby Bridges, her parents, her pastor, and her church. I believe they were listening. I believe they heard these words of Jesus. I believe they lived these words of Jesus.

The fact that Ruby was subjected to hostility and injustice, but still found joy and was happy at school and at home, can be difficult to fathom. The fact that Ruby's parents, her pastor, and her church supported her and prayed for those who were Ruby's enemies; who hated her, who cursed her and abused her – well, I think they were listening to Jesus words. I think they took Jesus' words to heart.

The psychologist could not wrap his head around it all. Maybe he's not the only one. Jesus does not call us to accept injustice, hate, or hateful acts. He does call us to radical actions to build God's kingdom. He call us to be merciful, forgive, and love - to become God's children in the way we live our lives in our world where we see injustice, evil and

hate. And with faith that we are doing the will of God, we might also have the joy that Ruby Bridges had through her faith in the midst of it all.