

“What Is Mercy?”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Luke 6:27-38
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on February 24, 2019

So, I had a children’s sermon prepared for this morning before I knew that Christiana and Lela would be here, and I’m so glad that they were here and talked to our kiddos today. But when I sat down to write out the sermon for grown-ups, I realized that this sermon wouldn’t be complete without the children’s version, so I’m going to do the children’s sermon anyway to get us going, but instead of making the kids come back up here, I’m going to make all of you participate. Now where are the kids in the room? Raise your hand. I need your help with this sermon, okay? Because grown-ups are notorious for not wanting to have fun and not participating in silliness, so if you are a kid sitting near a grown-up, it’s your job to make sure they play along, okay?

I want to start by talking about emotions. We’re going to review some of the emotions we tend to experience, and when I say an emotion, I want you to do your very best impression of that emotion with your face. Got it? Here we go.

What might your face look like when you’re . . . happy? What about sad? What about worried? Excited? Now what about mad? What might your face look like when it’s angry?

I have a question for you about anger. Is it wrong to be angry? No, it’s not wrong to be angry. The feeling of anger can be like this important little alarm bell inside your body that lets you know something is not right. For example, if you see a bully picking on another kid, and it makes you angry, that is good. It means your alarm bell is in good working order. If you see a bully picking on a kid and you think it’s funny, that means your alarm bell needs some serious maintenance.

Now, the tricky thing about our emotions is that they don’t always tell us the truth. Sometimes we get angry about things we don’t really need to be angry about. Just like sometimes we get worried about things we don’t really need to worry about. Emotions are sometimes spot on. Other times they exaggerate and over-function or they minimize and under-function. Other times they just uncontrollably spew nonsense—when that happens it is usually because we are tired or hungry or forgot to take care of ourselves in some other way, so our emotions on the fritz. They aren’t malfunctioning per se by being so dramatic; they’re just letting us know that some other part of our body or soul needs some tender loving care.

Okay, so back to anger. A good and important emotion, but a tricky one when it comes to knowing what to do with it. If you keep all your anger bottled up inside, that can make you sick. But if you let it come gushing out of you, it’s possible you might hurt someone. My rule of thumb is this: Anger often needs to be expressed, but I have to find a way to express it without hurting myself or others. Here’s an example. I once asked a friend how her family deals with anger. She said sometimes they get a box of teddy grahams and viciously bite the heads off the

teddy grahams. This is okay because teddy grahams are not actual real people or animals, and so it's perfectly safe to bite their heads off.

I'm going to give you a pop quiz to see if you're following along. Let's say you feel angry because someone called you a bad name, so you use your anger to call them a bad name back. Is that okay? Let's say you feel angry, and so you go inside and punch your pillow and scream into it where no one can hear you. Is that okay? Let's say you use your anger to hit someone in the face. Is that okay? Probably not. Let's say you use your anger to work for justice by forming a peaceful protest. Is that okay? Probably so. Let's say you use your anger to set a healthy boundary with a toxic person. Is that okay? Yep, it sure is.

The children's sermon is morphing into a grown-up sermon now, but I think talking about anger is super important if we're going to have any chance of understanding Jesus' words in the right way. What he has to say to us today is really, really hard to get, and if we're not careful, we'll interpret Jesus' words in Luke 6 in such a way where the Jesus who threw the money-changers out of the temple simply couldn't have existed. Angry Jesus is incompatible with an overly simplistic interpretation of his words today about loving the enemy and turning the other cheek. If we don't get the interpretation right, we contradict the very God who sent plague upon plague on the Egyptian slave-owners until they let God's people go. So we really have to put our thinking caps on here, and more than that, we have to open our hearts.

I think Luke 6 makes for a fascinating and potentially convicting read during this particular era in the life of our country. We're living in such a polarized time where divisions are deep and enemies abound. People we used to think of as friends we now have to block on Facebook or avoid talking to in the supermarket just to keep our blood pressure down. What does Jesus have to say to us in these challenging times?

Not too long ago I attended a workshop on civic discourse that I thought might help me with this very question. I feel lost trying to navigate these deeply polarizing times with wisdom and grace, and I thought maybe I could learn something at this workshop on Christian dialogue. But instead I was left deeply unsatisfied with the answers that were provided. Essentially the workshop leaders said some very nice-sounding things about learning to listen to one another and make room for people's opinions with whom we disagree. They even gave an inspiring example about a hot button issue in which they had managed to see "both sides" of a conflict. I won't go into the details, but this particular conflict had to do with race, the loss of black and brown lives, and showing respect to the American flag. The presenters lifted up this "healthy" dialogue between two differing points of view as an example for us to follow, and as a potential way forward in this mess that is our country.

This was supposed to be a Christian workshop, and so I raised my hand. "When oppression is present, doesn't that change the conversation about civic discourse? Like, didn't Jesus side with the poor, the oppressed, and the violated? If we are going to follow Jesus' example, I'm struggling with this notion that the experience of the oppressor should get just as much air time as the experience of the oppressed?"

This is also my rub with what Jesus says in Luke 6 because it could easily be misconstrued to mean that those who are oppressed should remain silent, polite, subservient, and passive, that victims should remain victims without complaint, without voice, without recompense or hope. But that interpretation is unequivocally inconsistent with the God who liberates slaves in Egypt, who defends the orphan and the widow, who feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty, who gives preferential treatment to the outcast and delivers words of woe to the religious hypocrite who values profit over people.

So what does Jesus mean when says love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, etc. What does he really mean? I don't know, but not knowing has never stopped me from preaching before, so here we go again.

I think this is an ongoing conversation, by the way, as all sermons are, and we should keep talking about it after I'm done with my special little time in the pulpit where I get to do all the talking and you do all the listening. This one-sided part is fun for me, of course, but the real work is what we do after the preaching moment ends and the conversation begins and the transformation starts. I don't know exactly how to interpret Jesus in this passage, because it is a really difficult one. But there are three guidelines I'd like to suggest as a starting place for understanding his words and taking them to heart.

Number One: There is no universal interpretation of what Jesus says here that will work the same way in all circumstances at any time. Sorry to break it to you, but applying Jesus' wisdom will require ongoing discernment. For example, how you respond when your usually loving and supportive spouse snaps at you in a moment of frustration is different from how you respond when a perpetually toxic person speaks to you in a demeaning way for the umpteenth time. Every time your alarm bell known as anger goes off, you don't react in the same way. Different scenarios call for different responses. An emotionally mature and grounded-in-Christ person will learn how to expand and diversify their responses beyond knee-jerk reactions. Jesus is opening up the possibilities so that we aren't stuck on automatic, wielding our anger to cause more damage.

I remember very, very shortly after my divorce someone in my life was trying to be helpful and, I suppose, hold me "accountable" to the ways of Christ. He asked me, "Kyndall have you forgiven your husband, yet?" And I told him honestly that I wasn't sure. That forgiveness was complicated and a process, and that it was probably going to be a long journey for me to figure it out. He said, "I've got to ask you something else. Have you asked him to forgive you yet?" I felt in that moment the wind knocked out of me, like he had punched me in the gut. For the record, that is not a question you should ever ask a survivor of abuse, because their inner work is unlearning the deeply damaging psychological message that the abuse was their fault. It is a long and arduous battle to accept that no matter what your flaws may be, you are not responsible for any of the abuse that happened to you.

There was a different person I spoke to, woman in my congregation, and in a moment of vulnerability I shared with her my worst and most horrific wound from my marriage. She said, "Kyndall, I want you to take the word forgiveness, place it in a box with the lid on, and set in on a shelf. Don't take that lid off the box unless you want to." That was the wisdom I needed. She

wasn't saying, "Don't you ever forgive that son of ____." She was acknowledging that this was my journey and no one else could dictate to me how or when to go about it. She was giving me permission to go at my pace, and without even having to say it, she was letting me know that God was with me where I was at. God wasn't out ahead of me, waiting for me to arrive at some supposedly holier response. God was with me in the present pain and confusion.

Number Two: You cannot, I repeat you cannot, correctly understand love without also understanding power. Loving your enemy does not look the same when your "enemy" is the guy who cut you off in traffic as when your enemy is the systemic oppression of your people—your race, your gender, your sexuality, etc. James Cone says, "Theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed . . . This is so because God is revealed in Jesus as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society." It so easy for people of privilege to use Jesus' words in Luke 6 to demand further subservience from the powerless. If people of color are angry, if women are angry, if sexual minorities are angry, if abuse survivors are angry, too often the people in power react, "You need to calm down." But that's not Jesus talking. That is the preservation of privilege talking. It is never the oppressor's job to demand forgiveness, to expect politeness, or to require "civil" discourse. What it means to "love your enemy" is always the prerogative of the oppressed to define and never, ever the job of the privileged to dictate down to those beneath them. If you are standing over and above telling someone how to love despite systemic violations, that isn't love, that isn't Christian, that isn't gospel.

Number Three: Love is the rule, is always the rule. Now, you might think that this should have been point number one and not point number three. Love as the rule is of utmost importance, after all. But I think in order to say "Love is always the rule," you've really got to say some other things first so that the possibility of misunderstanding and abuse is at least reduced if not eliminated. What does it mean to love your enemy, to be merciful and compassionate? First of all, who has the power in this scenario? If it is you, mercy looks like shutting your mouth and listening. If you are the person without power, mercy might mean opening your mouth, not in vitriol but in truth. How to be loving in these polarizing times is perhaps one of our primary Christian tasks, but do not be confused: love does not tolerate evil. Love does not condone prejudice or make space for bigotry. Love makes space for humanity, for truth-telling. Love does not mean you have to protect the feelings of oppressors. Love means you channel the anger into constructive paths of change.

This is by no means a complete explanation of Luke chapter 6. I think we will be learning our whole lives long and there is much more to be said and much more to be worked out. But I do think we have to know these three things: 1) There is no universal interpretation of what Jesus says here that will work the same way in all circumstances at any time. 2) You cannot correctly understand love without also understanding the dynamics of power. 3) Love is the rule, is always the rule. That's already a pretty tall order, so I'm glad we have each other so we can help one another along the way.

O Merciful God, whose Love we will spend a lifetime trying to comprehend, help us, help us, help us. We need your wisdom. We need your love. We need your power. Amen.