

Matthew 5:38-48

Victor Hugo begins *Les Misérables* with the story of Jean Valjean. He is an ex-convict who has just been released from nineteen years in prison for stealing bread to feed his sister's children. As he reenters society, no one will house him or give him work because of his criminal record — that is until he stumbles into the bishop's house. Much to Valjean's bewilderment, the bishop treats him with kindness and hospitality. Seizing the moment, Valjean steals the bishop's silver plates and, then, flees into the night.

The bishop's reaction to Valjean's treachery is not what we might expect. Instead of being angry and offering condemnation, the bishop examines his own behavior and finds himself lacking in charity. "I have for a long time wrongfully withheld this silver; it belonged to the poor. Who was this man? A poor man evidently," he reasons to himself. So when the police arrive with the captured Valjean, the bishop's silver in his possession, the bishop calmly greets the thief and says, "But I gave you the candlesticks also ... why did you not take them along with the plates?" The police, surprised and confused, reluctantly let the thief go. Jean Valjean expects blame and condemnation for his actions. Instead, he receives forgiveness and mercy. He expects hatred, and, instead, he receives love, and at that moment evil is transformed into good.

Though Jesus' words focus on how we are to treat others, they are based upon the way God treats us. Loving enemies, forgiving negative experiences, giving and expecting nothing in return, offering mercy instead of blame and condemnation — this is God's story. After all, God put a rainbow promise in the sky, even though we hadn't earned it. God made manna to fall from heaven, even though the wandering Israelites had done nothing but complain and whine. In Jesus' most difficult parable, the vineyard owner, who is God, pays the one-hour workers the same as the eight-hour workers, and thus gives them — and us — not what we deserve but what we need. And in the tale of the Prodigal Son, we meet a God who rejoices when a sinner comes home. Yes, again and again and again, God gives us grace instead of grief. God gives us blessing instead of blame. God gives us comfort instead of condemnation. And in the serendipity of those surprising moments we are changed.

Yet, it is one thing for God to be gracious to us. After all, that is what God is for. It's quite another for us to do the same. After all, we live in the real world, and we must be practical, cautious, and sensible. Loving our enemies and turning the other cheek is dangerous business — foolhardy and contrary to our best interests. And so we, the worldly people of the twenty-first century, live not in a world of grace, but instead in a world of hostility. Resentment and retaliation, judgment and blame are tightly woven into the fabric of our human nature. This negative reaction to the bad things in life is learned behavior in a world where self comes first. It is the disease of the soul which Jesus comes to heal. When he eats with Zacchaeus, when he forgives and empowers the woman at the well, when he breaks bread with Judas, and when he gives authority to faithless Peter, Jesus gives them — and gives us — grace. He gives us the benefit of the doubt, the gift of a second chance, the lavish and generous blessing of unconditional love. And then Jesus asks us to do the same — to take the risk, to make the decision, yes, to follow him. He asks us to be foolish enough to spurn the ways of the world, and to do things in a new way.

A new ethic — to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to forgive and love no matter what — it is what Jesus asks. But does it make sense? Is it realistic to expect the families of Timothy McVeigh's victims to forgive him and to love him? Is it appropriate to ask a battered wife to pray for the one who abuses her, to offer the other cheek to the husband who has struck the first one? God sends sun and rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike — but are we called to love and be merciful to people who take us for granted and use us for their own advantage? These selfless, idealistic values may be fine for a Messiah, but for those of us who are victims in the real world, they are offensive and dangerous. Unless, of course, we look at them in a new way.

Some suggest that these puzzling words from Matthew were offered as guidelines for healthy assertive behavior. You see, to love our enemy is to take charge of the situation, to refrain from just reacting as a victim of their behavior. To love our enemy is to change the situation, to take the initiative to relate to our victimizers in a new way — literally to take the power out of their hands and to put it in ours in a positive way. To love the enemy does not mean to like the enemy. Instead it means to

understand them as human beings — troubled and sinful human beings who have hurt us because they themselves hurt inside. It means to make a decision to respond to them in ways which will benefit them and perhaps lead to healing. This is not to suggest that we passively sit back and ask for more abuse. No, the loving thing to do, the thing that is in the best interests of the one who is doing the hurting, may be to blow the whistle, to press charges, to get help for a sickness that is out of control. *You see, to do good, to love and forgive those who offend us, is to refrain from hurting them in the same way they have hurt us.* It is to initiate a new form of confrontation and healing that will lead to the well-being of all the parties involved. An ethic of grace — far from being an offense — is an invitation to take the offensive, to live positively instead of negatively, to stop playing the role of victim, and to start living a life of proactive discipleship.

Martin Luther King, Jr., once wrote: “Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship ... We must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy neighbor, the thing that hurts, never quite expresses all that he is. An element of goodness may be found even in our worst enemy.”

King concludes that when Jesus asks us to love our enemies he is pleading with us to offer understanding and creative good will to all people. This is the only way we can truly be children of a loving God.

An ethic of grace is different from an ethic of justice. Instead of reacting to the sin of others, instead of basing our response on reward or revenge or reciprocity, we can, instead, initiate a new relationship based on love and hope. And, by taking the high road, we can become fertile ground for abundant life to grow, both for our enemy and for ourselves.

Though it won't always work this way, this confrontive type of grace can bring healing to all. I think about the story I read in Guidepost some years ago. A new neighbor moved in beside this mom with her three rambunctious boys. She was grieving the loss of her previous neighbor who had been a friend and second grandmother to her boys. The new neighbors were nothing like that. He took great care of his yard and

yelled at the boys whenever their ball came into his yard, damaging his plants. She called the police about their dog barking and they were cited. Life was filled with tension. Every time the boys went out she expected to hear a shout from next door or a phone call of complaint. She mentioned one night to her husband that perhaps they should move because life in the neighborhood was becoming unbearable. Her youngest listened and then said, "Why don't we bake and take them cookies?" She tried to explain that these people wanted nothing to do with them. He was insistent, "We should bake them cookies. That is what Jesus would want us to do." She couldn't argue with that and so they agreed that this coming Saturday they would make the neighbors cookies. She prayed all week about it fearing that the nasty response they were most surely going to get would destroy her young son's simple faith. Come Saturday they baked the cookies. Her son then went upstairs got dressed in his Sunday best and took the cookies next door. Mom stayed on the sidewalk ready to console. When the door opened her son said in a clear voice. "I made you cookies. Jesus loves you and so do I." He handed them to the woman and mom could see a tenderness in her eyes she had never seen. She took the cookies and knelt down and gave him a hug. That began a healing process that ultimately led to the new neighbors becoming beloved neighbors. As she wrote about this she was bemoaning the fact that this woman's husband had died and she was having to move. How would she ever get along without her neighbor's love and support?

Returning good for evil. Forgiving those who hate us. These words in Matthew are not spoken to the world at large. Jesus knew that secular people could neither understand nor honor such a difficult ethic. No, these words in Matthew are spoken to the disciples, to believers who have decided to follow Jesus. These words are spoken to us, people who have chosen to be the yeast in a world that needs the fullness of grace. This day may we hear these words, and do them, all to the glory of God.

May it be so — for you and for me. Amen.