

“Instead, . . .”

A Sermon
by Shelly Davis
Text: Luke 6:27-42

You have *got* to be kidding me!

How, on earth, is this even possible?

Love your enemies;
do good to those who hate you;
²⁸ bless those who curse you;
pray for those who mistreat you.

It's hard enough to “love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and love our neighbor as ourselves,”

And now you say we must love our *enemies*, too?!?!

This is too much Jesus, simply too much.

How do you love those
Who never will love you
Who are happy to shove you
Out in front of the train

How do you *not* hate those
Who would leave you lie bleeding
While they hold their prayer meeting

Singer-songwriter Susan Werner's lyrics continue:

How do you love those
Who never will love you
Who are so frightened of you
They are calling for war
How do you *not* hate those
Who have loaded their bibles
And armed their disciples
'cause I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. . .

And I can't find forgiveness
For them anywhere in this
And with God as my witness
I really have tried

How do you love those
Who never will love you
I think only God knows, God knows, God knows,
and [God] He is not taking sides

I hope one day [God] He shows us
How we can love those
Who never will love us
but who still we must love
How do you love those. . .

FORGIVENESS

Words and Music by Susan Werner

© 2007 for her album, *The Gospel Truth*

Listen to Susan sing it here:

<https://youtu.be/XtONq6o2vMc?si=swuLXlRq4l3yWi1c>

Those words are from a gospel song called “*Forgiveness*,” that singer-songwriter Susan Werner wrote for her 2007 album, *The Gospel Truth*.

Turns out that the collection of sayings of Jesus that the gospel writer Matthew shaped into a “Sermon on the Mount” and the gospel writer Luke crafted into a closely related, yet at times quite different, “Sermon on the Plain,” is filled with some really hard gospel truths.

- Difficult teachings on “blessings and woes.”
- Difficult, countercultural — *then and now* — proclamations of what it means to be and become children of our Most High God:
 - 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.

- Love your enemies;
- do good to those who hate you;
- ²⁸ bless those who curse you;
- pray for those who mistreat you.

And it is here that I must say in no uncertain terms, that these sayings of Jesus in no way, shape or form can EVER be faithfully used to condone abuse or violence of ANY kind: physical, emotional, material, or spiritual.

FULL STOP

These sayings of Jesus in no way, shape or form can EVER be faithfully used to condone abuse or violence of ANY kind: physical, emotional, material, or spiritual.

To “offer [or turn] the other cheek,” after having been already stuck once means we are called to

- *not* retaliate,
- *not* reciprocate,
- *not* react,
- *not* choose retribution,
- *not* return evil for evil, but
- *through* the grace of God, and *in* the grace of God,
 - to *choose to act differently*
 - in God,
 - of God,
 - in mercy,
 - to “*Be merciful, just as [our God] is merciful.*”
 - always with the aim of reconciliation and restoration
 - always with love

Jesus knew full well that it is not even remotely possible to love our enemies *without the grace of God* working in us.

And Luke's gospel story of Jesus and his teachings is in many ways one great "leveling"—

- in our understanding of God's grace
 - that astounding, scandalous grace
 - that is offered to all—without exception
- we all live side by side on one expansive "plain," and
 - whether we like it or not,
 - the generosity of God is not reserved for you or me, or only the ones we love

I would also remind us that the time and place in which Jesus lived and taught was "One of the farthest corners of the Roman Empire,

- Judaea, now part of modern-day Israel, had been a Roman ally since the second century BCE and became a Roman province in 6 AD.
 - This was a land of ancient traditions and religious fervor.
 - Decades later, when the itinerant rabbi Jesus was an adult, Judea was descending into chaos.
 - Decades of Roman rule were causing ever more resentment.
- Empire—
 - the Roman empire—
 - including, ultimately operatives of that empire who were driven to torture and kill Jesus because they feared him and the revolutionary power of the love he was preaching and embodying—
 - empire has a way of creating enemies all around.

- Empire is always based on dividing and conquering peoples and lands.

It is in this context—historical, political, spiritual—that Jesus said,

Love your enemies;
do good to those who hate you;
²⁸ bless those who curse you;
pray for those who mistreat you.

But what on earth *does* it look like to love our enemies—the ones who:

- hate us,
- curse us, and
- “want to shove us out in front of the train...”?

Operatives of the empire,
Religious leaders brazenly currying favor,
Emboldened, frightening and frightened technocrats,

What on earth *does* it look like
to love our enemies—

These deliciously warmer temperatures might have helped you forget the flash freezing that solidified into ice any snow or slush that had not yet been moved out of the way last Sunday.

We, however, happened to be out of town that day—having ventured even further north into Maine for a few days of wintry respite—and our cat sitter, God bless her, had her own sidewalks and driveway to contend with and barely had enough strength left to clear the rear entrance to our house, a narrow path to the front door, and a swath of our driveway.

So for much of this week we took turns with our ice chipper, bit by bit, rationing out a little pet-friendly ice melt here and there, and ever so slowly clearing away more and more ice.

Of course, we could have simply waited for these warmer temps—but we are solid Midwestern women, having even sojourned for a time in Minnesota, and we are conditioned to not EVER simply wait for it to warm up!

And I do still marvel at the way even the thickest, most stubborn ice—a clear and formidable enemy of mine this week—*can be moved*:

- very little, by very little
- chip, chip, chip
- work on an edge here; work on an edge there
- not too much force
- get a good angle
- let the gradual melting assist you—
 - that melting ice—
 - that trickle of water has its own loosening effect
- why even those individual grains of salt or ice melt or sand begin to work their way into and under the ice:
 - offering traction,

- creating small openings,
- freeing up the cold, solidified molecules
- as greater energy begins to turn them toward a more liquid, fluid state

You and I cannot

“love our enemies,

do good to those who hate us,

 bless those who curse us,

 pray for those who mistreat us”

any faster than I could move that ice all around the outside of my house this week.

But I do believe that

 each grain of kindness,

 each chip of grace,

 each small opening of a smile or

 each time a new angle is found for

 “doing unto others as we would
 have them do to us;”

Each time we:

- pray for those who mistreat us,
- bless those who curse us,
- do good to those who hate us,
- love, yes, even love our enemies,

We find, or participate in creating, another crack for the light to get in.

The 13th-century poet, Islamic scholar, Maturidi theologian, and Sufi mystic poet Rumi once wrote, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you.”

And “offering the other cheek,” may be offering “the place for the Light to enter” us...”

For sometimes, we know, our fiercest enemies live inside our own hearts, our own bodies, our own minds.

Yet it is grace—

- the unfettered,
- wildly extravagant grace,
- of our unbelievably loving God,
- that constantly seeks an opening in each of us—
 - a wound,
 - a crack,
 - a way,
 - to free up the cold, solidified molecules that have us—or our enemies—or both—
locked into frigid and rigid ways of
 - being,
 - thinking,
 - feeling,
 - gathering,
 - meeting,
 - deliberating,
 - discerning,
 - receiving and befriending the light of God

I, too, must soften, and turn, and find new levels of generosity within me to even begin to love my enemies.

The grains of salt that are God's grace in the ice of my presumed solidity slowly and persistently open me up to the possibility of forgiveness—

- God's forgiveness *of* me
- God's forgiveness *in* me
- God's forgiveness working in me *for* the forgiveness of others

God's grace is freely given—always.
That's why it's called grace.

And that grace, once received, turns us—

- yes, us—
- even you and even me—
- into salt and light . . .

¹³ “Let me tell you why you are here. [said Jesus] You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ “Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. [God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.] If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!

Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous loving God in heaven. —Matthew 5:13-14, *The Message*

Salt and light—
perhaps not only God-seasoning and God-coloring—
but also ice-melting and surface-clearing and
even enemy-loving?

Grace, mercy, and blessing are all gifts of God—thanks be to God—for

- the just *and* the unjust,
- the ungrateful *and* the grateful,
- the wicked—whether we mean that to be “really good” or “really bad,”
- our friends *and* our enemies
- within *and* without

When Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde closed her bold, daring, and loving sermon at this year's inaugural interfaith prayer service by choosing to preach the gospel of Jesus the Christ in the form of a direct appeal for mercy, she was simply and unabashedly bringing forward the very words of Jesus from our scripture for this day,

“Be merciful, just as your Father [just as your God] is merciful.”

Dearly beloved people of God, these words are also for us.

God is still speaking—to any who are listening.

I pray we will listen well.

Amen and Amen.