

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
February 24, 2019**

*Luke 6:27-38*

On February 1, I celebrated five years as Rector at Calvary Church. Leading up to that day, a number of people asked me questions like, Have you settled in at Calvary? Yes. How is your house? Fine. Do you still like Pittsburgh? Yes, love it. Does your wife like it? Uh huh. What's your favorite part? The weather. And so on. I realized my answers were mostly true but mostly boring and what was expected

I had fallen into the same trap that newly engaged couples do... that we all do. For marriage preparation, I always ask (and make each write it down) why you want to be married to the other person. The answers are invariably because I love him... because I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else... because she will make a great mother. All true but all boring... all expected. That's what we are supposed to say.

So I thought about it, observed, and took notes for two weeks and wrote a list of specific people and experiences of why this community is so meaningful. It's a similar task I give to each engaged couple so they reflect on the *why* as much as the *what*. Where, in your life, do you need to reflect on the why as much as the what of what matters to you?

For me, it is experiences like watching the way the Altar Guild sets out the vestments with care.... Listening to the choir rehearse the same line until they get just the right sound...Sitting with parishioner Chuck Grimstad the day before he died. I asked him if he was prepared or wanted to pray and all he wanted to talk about is how excited he was about Calvary Church and what it meant to him. I'll never forget that.

The reflection was to take general feelings and thoughts and make a list of specific examples... of ideas become manifest or incarnate. It was to put flesh and bones on abstract concepts. The universal is known through the particular. The reflection was really a love letter, as one parishioner noted. That's what the Bible is, in essence... a love letter from God to us.

With all that context, who or what is God to you? Who or what is this God we talk about and worship? One might say all powerful, all good, omniscient, the Creator, Trinity... all the terms one learned in college or confirmation class. All true but all expected and a bit boring.

Forget what you are supposed to say or think about God. What do you *really* believe? And the other question that is at least as important... *why* do you believe that? Be specific. Put flesh and bones on the ideas.

\*Some believe God is like a judge on a celestial throne, a cosmic Santa Claus with serious consequences deciding who is naughty or nice.

\*Some think of the jealous and angry bearded man in the sky and its constructs of patriarchy.

\*Others view God as an impersonal force that binds everything together, a higher power, or architect and creator who sets the universe in motion.

\*Some view God as the great vending machine in the sky who gives us things if we ask with the right words or ritual or sacrifice.

\*Some view God as an infantile projection or an embodiment of a parental figure of all that is just or good or fair.

\*Perhaps God is the source and embodiment of pure love.

What do you believe? And why? Not what is expected, but who is God to you? The disciples of Jesus knew what to expect about God. It was all written down for them in the books of Moses and the prophets, the Old Testament. Their upbringing and culture reinforced this view that was some combination of all of those ideas and more. That's what Jesus is talking about.

People were attracted to Jesus because he healed and fed them. Those were what the Bible called "the crowds." The "disciples" were those who made a commitment to follow Jesus and try to understand and live his teachings. Jesus made the stories come alive and made God feel more real and vital than they had ever known. They left everything to follow him.

These were the women and men who heard the teaching we read today in the Gospel. Just before this, Jesus had come down from the mountain and preached, what is now called, the sermon on the plain. This is akin to Moses coming down from the mountain and delivering the Ten Commandments. All the disciples would have made that connection. This was the Word of God from on high. We heard the first part of that sermon last Sunday about blessings and woes.

The first part of the sermon was something the disciples could all appreciate. Blessed are you who are poor or hungry or weep or when people exclude you. That's us, the disciples thought. God is on our side! But woe to you who are rich or full now or laughing or are respectable. The disciples knew that was *those* people. Everything about the first part of the sermon matched their expectations about the way things worked and what God was like. The Bible told them so. They knew the Bible was a love letter from God with them as the object of that divine love.

The next part of the story shatters their expectations. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

By definition, an enemy is not someone you love. They're the bad guy. Everyone knows that. I'm supposed to bless those who curse me? I want to punch them in the face or at least talk about them behind their back. I'm not going to bless them even if they sneeze. Let someone keep slapping me or take all my stuff? There is no fairness or justice in that. What happened to the woe are the rich part? These are impossible expectations for any normal person to follow.

And then Jesus drops in one of the most famous lines of the Bible. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Some version of that appears in most major religions. We call it the Golden Rule. A copy of it was framed and hanging in my classrooms all throughout school. Now that is something everyone can support.

We know it as an expression of the law of reciprocity. Positively, if I do something for you, you and I both expect you will do something nice for me. Negatively, if you are wronged, you are within your rights to wrong me back within certain bounds. An eye for an eye. To some degree this governs relationships with individuals, in families and groups, and even in society. There is a balance or fairness to it. Jesus is saying, the Golden Rule is good but not nearly enough. Everyone, even the sinners, do that.

This story is not about some new, impossible morality. Remember, this is a love letter from God to the disciples and to us. Jesus is saying, all those ideas you have what God is like and why... not wrong but expected and a bit limited.

God is the one who forgives the unforgiveable. God is the one who blesses those who curse or bless or ignore or hate the Lord. The Lord is not fair as we understand it. We don't get what we deserve but instead receive mercy. God gives all of the divine self to us asking nothing in return but that we offer the love back and share it with one another. **You** are the children of God. If God loves even the unlovable, how much more will run over into your lap?

The Gospel writer Luke made one more important point that is not obvious until you see it. If you really want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Jesus did all of those things...loving his enemies, blessing those who cursed him, turning the other cheek, giving the shirt off his back all the way to the Cross and back because of love. Jesus offered himself for the whole world but would have done it just for you.

Jesus is the flesh and bones, the incarnation of God in the world. That is who we worship. The one who asks nothing but we return that love to God and share it with the world around us.