

(Luke 6:27-38 NRSV)

<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. <sup>37</sup> "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> 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."

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## The Gain Is in the Giving

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Text: Luke 6:27-38

“A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” – a good agricultural image of bountifulness. It is the image from the grain harvest in Biblical times. So essential was wheat to the ancient economy that the calendar festivals centered around its cultivation. In October the Festival of Booths marked the sowing of the wheat seed. And the conclusion of the harvest was celebrated with the festival of weeks at the end of May. So important was wheat to ancient life that it has a prominent place in the Bible. Passover is the festival of unleavened bread. It memorializes the flight of the Israelites from Pharaoh in such a hurry there was no time to raise the bread. The parable in which the wheat and the weeds are growing together has such enormous meaning because the crop was at risk, and the loss would have been catastrophic. And when Jesus said that one does not live by bread alone, his hearers would have thought, this man must be talking about something pretty important if it is as essential as bread.

So, “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” was an image of a great plenty, a great plenty of the staff of life. It was a promise of more than enough of perhaps the most important commodity in ancient agriculture.

And it was an image of more than that, too. Maybe you remember the old Norman Rockwell print of the woman at the butcher shop. On the scale sits a chicken. Behind the counter the butcher has his thumb pressing down on the scale, looking to add an ounce or two. In front of the counter the shopper is pushing up on the scale, hoping to subtract an ounce or two. It’s a funny print, especially because we get the idea it all evens out in the end. But it has a darker side, too. For it suggests a definite lack of trust between the butcher and his customer.

But, what kind of proprietor is conveyed in the promise of grain in this morning’s reading? “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.” Here is the promise not only of plenty of the bread of life, but that plenty given with the customer at heart. Like the old baker’s dozen, it conveys getting even more than we expected. It conveys getting more than we paid for. It promises an overflowing abundance beyond our hopes.

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And is not that what we all hope for? Maybe not a lap full of grain, but a feeling that we have been given life overflowing in our lap?

But that's the end of the passage. And from the way it starts, it sounds like a roundabout trip to get there. "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."

These admonitions hardly sound like the road to a feeling of well being or the promise of a lap full of plenty. There is an old Kudzu comic strip that goes back fifteen years or so. In it the preacher Will B. Done has apparently been leading the congregation in a study of these very same verses we find at the beginning of this morning's passage. Evidently they have studied them over and over again enough so that Will feels that the congregation is ready for an oral exam from the pulpit. He says, "Alright, now, we have been studying the Bible, and I'm going to begin a verse, and I want you all to shout out the ending." This should be easy, thinks Will. So he starts, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek ..." Soon there is a symphony of answers from the congregation. "Kick him in the shin; wack him back; get a gun; hit him in the head," come the responses. Will B. Done looks out over his flock more than a little crestfallen and quietly remarks, "I guess we need a little more study."

I suppose so. Most of us know how the verse is supposed to end. But I imagine if we're honest enough, we probably feel a little more like Will B. Done's congregation than we would like to admit. It's just that suffering abuse, theft, hatred, cursing and a wack to the cheek hardly seem to be the way to a feeling of well-being and abundance. It feels as if well-being and abundance are the very things at risk when we let others walk all over us and take everything we have.

Sometimes it helps to turn a problem upside down to see it clearly. It's the reason Jesus' parables are so effective. When they ask him why he eats with sinners, rather than answer that question he tells a parable about a banquet where all the invited guests refuse the invitation. Suddenly, instead of listening to Jesus try to get out of a sticky situation about the company he keeps, his hearers find themselves in the middle of a story in which they get the distinct impression that they have refused God's invitation to the table. Turning the question slightly often illuminates another face of the quandary.

So, in this question of what one is to do when others curse you and slap you in the face, rather than focus on what you want to accomplish, let's focus for a moment on what we imagine this other person is really trying to accomplish. I'm not asking you to walk a mile in their shoes, exactly. In fact, I want to keep you out of their shoes. I'm not asking you to excuse what they are doing. But I do want you to see how easy it would be to end up just like them.

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So, people dislike you, maybe hate you, maybe strike you, maybe abuse you, or maybe just call you very nasty words in traffic. What is going on with them? Well, it seems to me there are but two likely possibilities. Perhaps they are simply nasty, rotten, evil people who are motivated by a hateful core. I think that's probably how we generally think of them. The other possibility is that they are reasonably normal people, not unlike you and me, who are trying to find their way to abundance and happiness. I have no doubt that there may be a few people in the world who are downright evil. But my guess is that there are a whole lot more who are acting miserably all in the hope of finding plenty and well-being.

And it is not so hard to see how they ended up acting way. You may even know some of this ground yourself. I know I do.

We start with a normal person who craves the idea of plenty, of abundant wealth – of a “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.” Like the customer in the Norman Rockwell painting, she understands that the best way to get there is a direct route – take care of herself, try to get the most for herself, look out for being cheated. Soon enough that becomes the way of life, one that few would argue with. If you want the good things in life, you have to work hard for them. As my mother used to say, they don't grow on trees.

But the picture begins to show cracks in several ways. For some reason, no matter how successful one becomes at this game of getting abundance, the abundance never seems as fulfilling as she thought it would. Well, that's alright. It just must not be enough. So, after more she reaches. But oddly enough it gets worse. Now she has a bunch of things, and she is afraid of losing them. Everyone becomes something of a threat. Will this person steal what I have? Will I have to pay too many taxes? Will my things I have worked so hard for be taken away from me? The surprising thing is that it takes very few belongings to begin to think this way. In Jesus' story it might mean having just two coats. But whether it is two coats or three houses and two BMWs, the concern about losing the things that make you happy is there. Except for one thing, one small thing. Are you fulfilled yet? Have the two coats, or the three houses and two BMWs given you well-being and made you feel as if you have a lap full of everything you need? Probably not.

So now, we have our normal person with some belongings, hard-earned belongings, designed to make her feel satisfied. And she still doesn't feel complete, it will still take more. And now it gets crazier because on the one hand she still needs more, and on the other hand she has to protect the things she already has from those who would take it away from her. Boy, this getting to fulfillment is harrowing work. And a lot of people seem to be getting in the way of it, too.

So, so far, on the way to happiness, our normal person has developed grasping, greed, self-centeredness, fear, and anxiety.

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The whole thing very often takes another nasty turn. If I have worked hard to have what I have, and if it is not enough, if I am still dissatisfied, if I am in fact more anxiety ridden and miserable than before, then it must be somebody's fault.

Hitler's German population thought it was the Jews. And this wasn't just Hitler. Daniel Goldhagen in his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* makes the compelling case that Hitler was made possible by ordinary Germans whose cultural dislike of the Jews allowed them to think there was nothing wrong with Hitler's Aryan dream. And that dream was based in large part on the idea that there was not yet a full sense of happiness and well-being in Germany and in ordinary Germans' lives, and were it not for the Jews there would be. The death camps were the result.

In our own land we found a similar dehumanization of African Americans. Martin Luther King tells of how motivation for his work was found in looking into the eyes of his six year old daughter and having to explain to those sad eyes that she was not allowed in the amusement park because of the color of her skin. And why was that so? In simple terms it was because ordinary white people had come to the conclusion that her presence was a threat to their Quixotic search for happiness.

Racism is still with us, even if it is no longer a noble position. Now, only extremists proclaim out loud that blacks are a cancer in society. But that designation is now readily applied to gay people. There are any number of people, ordinary Americans, who will shout to you through angry and clenched mouths that our society is going down the tubes and that it would not be, if it weren't for the explosion of immorality as evidenced by the abomination of homosexuality. But a closer look may reveal an unhappy, fearful, anxious person looking for some obvious reason to explain why they do not experience well-being in their lives, do not experience "a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over" in their laps.

When you meet one who hates you, curses you, abuses you, takes your coat and slaps your cheek, guess what? You have quite probably met an ordinary person who has struggled to be happy but who is not, and who is angry, defensive, fearful and flailing at life trying desperately to find well-being.

Recall that we took up this part of the conversation to turn the question around. We looked at those who curse you, hate you, abuse you, steal your coat and slap your face to see what was going on with them. What we found was that the normal ways most people imagine to a feeling of abundance, gathering up more and more belongings and defending them and hating those whom they think responsible for their unhappiness, these normal routes people imagine to well-being and abundance quite honestly lead in the other direction. Those who follow them are left more anxious and unhappy than before, and they often do great harm to others in the process. Jesus desperately wanted his hearers to avoid that path, and so he

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told them not to respond in kind. He told them that ironically generosity, not selfishness would make them happier and lead to a lap full of abundance.

I want to leave you with a story of perhaps the most contented and joyous person I have ever had the pleasure to know. He was my uncle Crosby from deep Louisiana, down in Huey Long territory. It was in the 1930s, the middle of the depression. As it was everywhere, it was hard there. I have heard them all tell of the hand breaking work of scraping and tanning cowhides and dawn to dusk days spent in the cotton fields to just barely afford to live. Every family depended on such work for some cash. For eating they depended largely on the crops they could grow and the animals they could raise.

Nearby to my uncle Crosby's place lived a black family, in the same straights as everyone else, but whose survival was made doubly difficult because of their race. They had an old tractor that barely ran. It was held together by tin cans, wire and prayers. And one year, right at the beginning of the planting season, it quit running at all. Charlie, who headed the household was at wits end. Without a crop in the ground, his family couldn't make it. Yet there was no money with which to fix the tractor. Finally, in desperation, he decided to walk over to Crosby's house, just to see if there were any chance that this white man would let this black man borrow his tractor. It was a long shot, but he didn't have any other options.

Though I was not yet born, I have a deeply vivid picture of the conversation in my mind. Standing in the damp lush smells of a Louisiana spring, sensing on the one hand rich earth ready for seed and on the other hand a fearful apprehension that this might be the end of the road, Charlie tentatively told his neighbor that his tractor had finally quit for good and asked if he might borrow Crosby's. Crosby then did what from other stories I know was fully in character. He said, "Charlie, you can't borrow the tractor. Just take that tractor on home with you; it's yours." And then Crosby went out and bought another used tractor with the only savings he and his family his family had left.

Crosby died the year I started training for the ministry, and I can only wish I will ever be as good a man as he. I learned so many things from him. But maybe the best thing I learned was the gain is in the giving. Amen.