

Year C 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany Inhabit the Heart of God Luke 6 vv27 to 38

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. The magnitude of those words perhaps hits home when we remember how Matthew puts it: Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt.5.48). Now this is a pretty tall order, an impossible task. As you listen to the list of examples that Luke lays out for us – the things we are supposed to do in order to be merciful just as God is merciful – it doesn't feel any less impossible.

Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. Let people take from you and give them even more than they've taken. Bless those who curse you, and so on. Be merciful as God is merciful.

What we are being asked to do is to pattern our lives after God. We are being asked to do things that the majority of our society does not do, things that don't come naturally...love enemies, let people take from you, forgive...but these do come naturally to God. God's heart is a heart of love. And so, God's heart is filled with compassion, generosity, forgiveness. God's heart desires relationship with all creation, healing and wholeness for all creation...freely given, desiring only love in return. In this passage we learn that we are invited to inhabit the heart of God. We are shown what that may look like and feel like and what that means for our lives...so let's take a closer look.

We hear Jesus saying, for those of you who are still listening, I have more to say to you. Still listening? Well, he's just finished quite a long list of woes: woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, and laughing, and accepted because your status as residents of God's kingdom is in question. People tend to stop listening when they're hearing what they don't want to hear. But, to those still listening,

the shocking, turn-the-world-upside-down teachings continue to roll off Jesus' tongue.

Love those who do not love you, he tells them. Love, do good, bless, pray for...This is love that does not stay inside our thoughts but is shown in what we do. We can't just say, "Sure, we love our enemies." We have to show that we do. This was just as hard to swallow back then as it is now, perhaps, in a way, even more difficult back then. Jesus and the disciples lived in world of reciprocity – you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. The unspoken rules of reciprocity were deeply embedded in this society, so much so that Seneca observed, "the exchange of favour and services in the Roman world bound together human society...The resulting web of overlapping obligation spread throughout the empire, ultimately with everyone indebted to the emperor" (p.49 of *Introducing the New Testament*). The financial indebtedness between people was a symbol of their social relationship and so you would never stray far from your social-economic circle to help someone.

This system of "I'll do something for you if you do something for me", resulted in the fact that even the "sinners" seemed to have some decent qualities: loving those who loved them, doing good for those who did good for them, lending to those who could return the favour.

But...give your coat and your shirt for nothing in return? Give to everyone who asks, not just your rich friends? Jesus was asking them to unravel the fabric that held their society together. Part of this fabric also involved how to deal with offences...if someone stole from you, there was a consequence. If someone insulted you, there was a consequence. If someone struck your cheek, there was a

consequence. Jesus is instructing them to ignore the consequences and only dole out love and generosity instead. He's asking them – and us – to dismantle the societal norms that have been in place for as long as we can remember because these norms have no place in the fulness of God's kingdom that is coming.

In God's kingdom, what we do will not be directed by what others do to us. In God's kingdom, what we do is in response to our God who is love and desires to fill us with love until we become that love – inhabiting the heart of God. Jesus models this for us on the night of the last supper with his disciples. When Jesus knelt to wash their feet, he washed everyone's feet. Jesus washed the feet of Judas – the one who would betray him. Jesus washed the feet of Peter – the one who would deny that he even knew Jesus.

We are not being asked to be passive in the face of wrongdoing to ourselves and to our world. Jesus is asking us to resist the wrong by actively engaging in acts of love and compassion: love, do good, bless, pray for...pattern your life after God. A very tall order, indeed.

This is why Jesus addresses these instructions to the whole group before him, not to individuals. "You" is directed at all the people. You love, do good, bless, pray for...together, all of you, because we cannot do this on our own. In the kingdom of God, we live and act as a community. We concern ourselves with each other's business, not because we are nosy busy-bodies but because we care and support one another. And this is one of the big reasons why we worship together using liturgies with specific structures, why, each year, we wash each other's feet on Maundy Thursday even though it may make us feel awkward, why we relive the new covenant Jesus made with us with his blood and body – the wine and bread.

We are learning to become humble foot-washers. We are learning to live as the one body who shares the one bread. Our liturgies are the practice ground of the perfection of God's kingdom that is unfolding around us with our help. The more we learn and live the kingdom life, the more it is revealed in the world. We are being shaped into a people who love, do good, bless, pray for...a people who are merciful just as God is merciful...a people who inhabit the heart of God.

The heart of God is a deep mystery to us. We don't yet know the full extent of God's love but we often like to think we do. Humans have the unfortunate tendency to believe they know who God is going to welcome into the kingdom and who God will leave on the outside looking in. Throughout the gospels, when Jesus tells us not to judge and not to condemn, this is what he's talking about. It's not that the church should never make moral and ethical judgments. It's just that we need to remember that we don't know the final verdict. God wants all sinners to turn to him and join the movement toward the fullness of his reign. God's heart is big enough to embrace all things.

When I was wandering through Canterbury Cathedral, I stood on the very place that Archbishop Thomas Becket had been struck dead by four of King Henry II's knights. "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" Henry had blurted out, when he and Thomas had been in conflict over the rights and privileges of the Church. His knights took it as an order. Henry felt guilty and had the monks of Canterbury Cathedral whip him in penance. King Henry VIII later viciously destroyed the tomb of Thomas, wiping away all trace of a man Henry considered an enemy to his family. Cold blooded murder to please a superior. Perhaps feelings of satisfaction in whipping the man who had caused the death of a

beloved leader. Anger deeply unreasonable and uncaring. These, although extreme, are the emotions and actions of which humans are capable, against which God urges us to fight.

In community and in the embrace of God is where we find the strength to turn from the ways of the world and gain the measure that is promised – life in the fullness of God's kingdom where we will inhabit the heart of God.