

**February 23, 2025**

**“Cherished Belonging & Practical Righteousness”**

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**Scripture Luke 6:27-38**

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

About 25 of our congregation's leaders gathered yesterday for a leaders' retreat. The content of our retreat focused on something we generally avoid: SHAME. Our culture is steeped in shame. Shame is a primary tool for getting people to conform to external expectations about who and how they should be.

Social Scientist Dr. Brené Brown has spent decades studying connection, vulnerability, and shame. She defines shame “as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.” She continues: “I don’t believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact, I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. [Shame] can make us dangerous.”

In our current social and political climate, we are seeing just how dangerous the disconnection caused by shame can be.

So what's the antidote? Is there some way to counter the harmful and dangerous impacts of shame? Yes. The antidote to shame is empathy. Brown defines empathy as “the ability to feel with another person by taking their perspective and acknowledging their emotions.” The good news is that this is a skill that can be learned and practiced.

Now Jesus doesn't talk about empathy, but he does talk about love. A lot. He instructs his disciples to act in love towards everyone -- even enemies. Even those who hate us or curse us. Even our abuser. It's worth noting that the love Jesus calls for in relationship to an abuser does not involve any interaction with that person. It does not condone or justify the abuse. It simply calls for prayer -- the only way to love someone who has systematically harmed us is to turn them and the situation over to God in prayer. Hopefully, this happens in the context of removing ourselves from the abuse and centering our own healing.

Now, if we're not careful in our reading of this passage, we can do a lot of harm. We can read into this self-sacrifice that is enabling, that allows injustice and harm to continue unchecked, that is unboundaried, has no accountability and calls us -- not to be faithful in love and empathy but to be doormats to those who would (and do!) harm us.

Which is why the last section of this morning's reading is so very important.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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.”

It can read as a transactional statement -- do this and you'll get that.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is saying.

I believe that Jesus is being descriptive.

Because here's the thing that I've learned from my own life:  
how we treat others is a reflection of how we treat ourselves -- either consciously or unconsciously. You may or may not know this about me, but I can be pretty judgmental. I've worked hard over the years to cultivate curiosity and let go of judgment. And here's the truth of it -- however judgmental I am towards someone else, I am **at least** that judgmental towards myself.

In the leadership retreat yesterday, we talked about avoiding calling other people names -- avoiding saying simple things like "They're such a jerk" or "what a lazy bum" because if we're willing to use those words about another person, we're willing to use them about ourselves.

And the more we can offer grace to others, the more we can offer it to ourselves. Our condemnation of others is reflected in our condemnation of ourselves. If we cannot forgive others, God help us as we try to forgive ourselves. Because we can't do it.

Jesus isn't telling us that we have to forgive others in order to be forgiven, Jesus is describing the human reality that our ability to offer others empathy is directly proportional to our ability to offer that empathy to ourselves. Our ability to meet another person's shame with love and understanding is directly correlated to our ability to meet our own shame with love and understanding.

It's interesting to me that Jesus connects all of this with identity -- with being God's children. It's not that we love because our enemy somehow deserves it. We love because that's who we are. Because that's what it means to be God's children. And because the measure in which we are able to give love, to do good, to bless, to pray for, to lend without expecting back and to forgive is exactly the measure in which we will be able to receive those same things.

It's not a threat or a promise -- it's simply a description of human nature.

Episcopal priest and speaker Nadia Bolz Weber has this to say about forgiveness: "Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, *start to become them*. So what if forgiveness, rather than being [a wimpy] way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so *not* okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people... aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. [Free people don't have to live in shame] And *that's* worth fighting for."

So let us love our enemies, let us do good to those who hate us. Let us bless and pray and lend and give. Let us practice empathy and forgiveness. Because that is who WE are. Because that is how we get free. And because that is how we open ourselves to receiving Gods' gifts of love, goodness, blessing, connection, generosity and forgiveness. May it be so. Amen.