

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Leigh Bruno
Sunday, February 20, 2022

Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“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.”

Love your enemies, Do unto others as you would have done to you. These words we learn from a young age, the tenets we hold most dear to our religion. In one of the most quoted passages of scripture, we are taught one of the most crucial aspects of Christianity- love. Since then, we have had a tumultuous journey holding up to that standard. Christianity has been a vehicle of hate and a justification for many atrocities, while also being used as a progressive force, helping to expand social welfare programs and lead the civil rights movement.

The scripture starts off with a set of tasks aimed to embarrass those who oppress you. At first glance, each looks like a benign act, like “bless those who curse you.” Scholars tell us that when you look closer, you realize that the scripture is telling people how to disrespect and stand up against the Roman officers who oppressed them. “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;” serves as an example of how to fight back while being beaten. By offering your other cheek, you are not only saying that you are not hurt by the beating, but you are outright disrespecting the officer. In an honor and shame culture, turning your cheek would force the officer to hit you with their hand used for unclean tasks, which is shaming. It has a dual meaning, as it would also cause the officer to have to switch from hitting with the back of their hand to their palm. The fist was reserved for relationships between equals, while the backhand slap was for someone considerably “beneath you.” By turning your cheek, you are forcing the officer

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to strike you with a fist, thus forcing him to accept your humanity.

So how does this religion, born out of strife and oppression, with early scripture detailing how to stand up to oppressors, become a way of oppression in the future. How does Christianity become a tool to invade and colonize other lands, to justify social Darwinism, to allow discrimination based on who people love?

During the late 1800s, as European powers began a mad dash to divy up the underdeveloped world, race theory and social Darwinism were two main reasons. While most simply cared about economic power, grabbing resources, and one-upping the other powers, an underlying cause was to help the “backward races.” Acting based on their morals, good faith, and self-interest, European powers carved up Africa and destroyed what was left of indigenous culture in the Americas. They sent children to residential schools to learn English, forced indigenous populations to stop speaking in their native language, prevented them from practicing their religion and customs, and forced them to learn Christianity. William McKinley, our 25th president and a devout Protestant, was swayed into invading the Philippines during a war with the argument that taking control from the Spanish would allow the spread of Christianity to the barbarians. But since they were controlled by the Spanish, they were already all Catholic. That little reason was one factor in the invasion and occupation of an entire group of people that continued for 48 years. The effects of this moral obligation to spread Christianity and white, European values are still being uncovered today, with the recent discovery of mass graves from residential schools totalling more than 1300 unmarked bodies, and the continued political strife in Africa since Europe created the countries without any regard for the different tribal, lingual, ethnic, or religious factions already in place.

Most of this is the byproduct of centuries of taking the bible out of context. There are a multitude of examples, with several in this passage, beginning with “and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt” It is another example of standing up to oppression, by voluntarily giving up more than the oppressor already took, demonstrating that they are not affected by them, but is used to spread a message about giving everything you have. “give, and it will be given to you” has been morphed into a justification for indulgences and offering, but in reality, it was a message about the measure we judge is the measure that we will be judged with. It is another example of Do to others as you would have them do to you, so what we give is what we receive. The paradox is huge. The injustices throughout history with the justification of Christianity speak for themselves. But on the other hand, there is still hope. The scripture details how to enact nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. This message has since been used to spread protest movements against segregation, Jim Crow laws, and more. Here in the south, black baptist preachers helped end the separate but

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equal facade that still continued before and after the court declared it unconstitutional. They used messages from Christianity to make real change and help change the minds of white congregations like ours.

Growing up here at Idlewild has given me a glimpse at the effect that service has, both on the community and as a part of my faith journey. Growing up doing small Samaritans during Wednesday night WELL, packaging sandwiches and Christmas gifts-to joining Wednesday morning food distribution during the height of the pandemic- has shown how impactful service is and how it is, to me, the most obvious way we can see God's work in the world

So, we have this paradox. This religion that I have grown up in and seen the wonders it can do mixed with the historical AND present-day crimes Christianity is used to justify. So where do we go from here? How do we grapple being part of a system with? The horrors in our past? How do we grapple with making concessions for those actions? How do we change this collision course between cruelty and Christianity that seems to be repeating to make sure it does not happen again?

As we try to answer these questions, we must return to scripture for wisdom and we are called to trust in the promise of our savior when Jesus says, "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."

The hopeful message of scripture is that there will be a time, a space, a reality where efforts toward good...efforts toward justice...efforts toward equity...will result in a better, more just, more equitable society. The measure invested will be the measure returned. So we work and we trust. We love and we trust. We hope and we trust. That Christ is still at work. Through the best that Christianity has to offer. Thanks be to God. Amen."