

Karen Hollis
Sermon – Luke 6:27-38
February 24, 2019
The Transforming Community

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Um

Personal:

Have you ever been irritated by someone at church? I bet that's never happened to you. Furniture gets moved, someone sits in your pew, you go years without singing your favourite hymn, you try and try to get volunteers for something you think is important but no one is interested. Or perhaps someone publically puts you down, someone in authority breaks trust with the congregation, the minister shares something you intended to be shared in confidence. What do we do when we're hurt by someone in the congregation? As I look around this gathering, I know I have a unique relationship with each of you – that's maybe 40 relationships of just the people here. I have a relationship with [people A B C] and so on. But then [person C] also has a relationship

with everyone in the room. There's actually a formula for figuring out how many unique relationships there are in a group of people. $[(N \times (N-1))/2]$ For a group of 40, say, there are 780 possible unique relationships. That's a lot of relationships! I thought it was interesting that the website where I found the formula was careful to say *possible* relationships, naming the reality that not everyone is going to know each other, and some people may consciously or unconsciously choose not to interact. The church is full of people and in community pinches happen between people, feelings are hurt and sometimes real damage is done to our sisters and brothers in Christ.

When I look at today's text through the lens of the human impact of being wronged by someone in their faith community, I'm aware of what the text says and what it doesn't say. This text is about behaviour, not feelings. 'Love your enemies' does not mean find love for your enemies in your heart. It is a verb; behave in a loving way toward your enemies. It does not say don't feel what you feel. It does not should a person into forgiveness or give us a biblical

mandate to should someone else. It doesn't say, just get over it.

This text is first of all a personal challenge to separate our feelings from our actions. Processing our feelings, discerning steps to take, wondering how to hold people accountable, grieving – all of that happens off line in private. This text is a personal challenge to behave in a loving way to those who hate you. In this way, how another person behaves doesn't dictate our behaviour; instead, our relationship with God grounds our behaviour. This stuff is hard.

I heard a man from a First Nations community in the last few years speak about reconciliation; in his talk he shared that when someone wrongs someone else in the community, the person who feels wronged leaves a gift in the path of the other person every day for a year. They leave a gift that person can find as they go about their day, every day for a year. At the end of that year the wrongdoing is forgiven. Outwardly, they express a loving act; inwardly, the person is slowly being transformed.

Relationship:

We think of acts of love transforming the receiver of these acts, warming our hearts with generosity and kindness. What does it do to our damaged hearts to exercise love out of our own free will? Love is not just generosity and kindness; it is standing in my truth, in my integrity, claiming my space and acknowledging the space of others.

Loving is respecting self and other. Respecting self is to hold others accountable for how they treat me; love for other is the golden rule. Take verse 29: If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. At that time, one would hit with one's clean hand, the right hand. Masters would hit slaves on the right cheek – the only way to do that is with the back of the hand. If you turn the other cheek you make them either use their left hand, unclean hand, which highlights that what they're doing is unclean, or they have to hit with the front of their right hand, the way one strikes an equal. Either way you've made your point. Justice is love in public.

Community:

A community that is grounded in God's call to loving is about selfless serving. It's not reactive or passive aggressive; it is boundaried; it isn't about playing the victim; it is demanding justice; it does not inflict further harm; it does hold others accountable and deal with the issue.

Putting this passage into practice is remarkably difficult because we are humans living in community; we do have feelings and it's really difficult to detangle them from previous hurts, from our families or origin, from our action. The only way I know of to live in a loving way is to be grounded in God's love. It's difficult to do one without the other. So a community grounded in God's love is necessarily called to the work of learning from God's love in the community context.

This stuff is hard, which is why I like the idea of leaving gifts for people to find, because I don't really want to interact with someone who has hurt me. And I don't want to do something loving toward them. I worked with a woman several years ago whose idea of giving me feedback was yelling and blaming. After I

recovered from the experience I wanted to have a meaningful conversation to clear the air, but part of my reptilian brain was still sure she was going to eat me, so I didn't talk with her. It was all I could do some days to just keep breathing while I walked by her office. Luckily I didn't have to work with her directly and I had good support around me.

I wasn't capable of showing her love while remaining in my own skin; my terrified self couldn't be anything to her in those days. On my own I couldn't behave in a loving way to her, but now, when I stop and remember who I am (beloved child of God); what my call is as a disciple (to live as Jesus lived); my internal perspective changes from the frenzied and scared to calm and generous, as if I'm taking on the role of Christ. Stepping into Christ's body in my mind, I see her in her own hurting and brokenness, in her full humanity and I can be loving.

I couldn't do that on my own and no one is asking me to. But putting on the body of Christ as it were, it reminds me of my identity in Christ and call to love people, even people who

hate me. In that space I don't feel afraid of her, because there is nothing she can do to me. Seeing her through the eyes of Christ melts away the power I give her and I can have the conversations I needed to have with her, be loving toward her, be Christ to her. I wish I had been ready for this teaching at the time. We're ready when we're ready; God will keep on calling us in our individual lives. The sum of all our acts of love, justice, generosity and boundaries is the work of the transforming community.