

“The Difficulty with Loving God”

Luke 6:27-36

7th Sunday after Epiphany

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In his delightful book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, author Bill Bryson does a little “study” on how many people were necessary for your existence here today.

In other words, your parents are two people.
But each parent had parents. So that makes 6 people.
Your great-grandparents make 14 people...and so forth.

If you keep going back like this—say, 30 generations, just counting parents, grandparents, great-grandparents—over 1 billion people were necessary for your existence here today.

Now if you go back to the time when Luke wrote his Gospel, the number is 10 to the 18th power...

It’s a huge number.
An unimaginable number.

But the problem with THAT number, says Bryson, is not it’s too big to imagine. The problem with that number is that it’s “several thousand times [greater than] the total number of people who have ever lived.”¹

In other words...in some way, shape, or form, the ancestral line for you to end up here was not “pure,” not separate from everyone else. At some point, your ancestral line had to cross with someone else who is in this room today.

And what that means, in purely mathematical terms, is that the moment you entered this sanctuary...you were ALREADY related to almost everybody here.

Look ahead, behind, to the sides—those people are your family.

Or to put it more bluntly, you don’t just have a Yankees fan in your pulpit this morning. You’ve got a Yankees fan in your own bloodline!

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Broadway Books, 2003.

I mention this—

the probability that we're all related—
because one of the topics that's really...challenging, and fun, and difficult,
and timely to preach about...is FAMILY.

What it means to be family.

- On the one hand, families can be our greatest source of pain, of aggravation, of WOUNDEDNESS in our lives.
- On the other hand, families can be our greatest joy, our lifeblood, the very reason we get up every day.

Especially when people who are NOT in your immediate family...decide to treat you like one of the family.

For example, I remember how Anne Lamott describes the church family that helped turn her life around. One morning years ago, she slipped very quietly into St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in San Francisco.

St. Andrew was a church with plenty of people living in poverty, people who had broken families of their own.

Lamott's life was broken at the time. She was single, she was drinking, she was pregnant, father not in the picture...and so she decided, in church one Sunday, to announce that she was expecting a child.

Lamott writes:

“All these old people, raised in Bible-thumping homes...clapped. Even the women whose grown-up boys...were doing time in jails...rejoiced for me.

“And then almost immediately they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought casseroles ...And they began slipping me money.

But it wasn't the dollar bills that meant so much to Lamott.

What did they really bring?

Lamott says: "...they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be part of the family."²

Think for a moment about where you will spend your love today.

Many in this room will spend a large portion of your love on your family.

Some of you may spend some love on friends...who feel like family.

Perhaps some of you will take the time, after worship, to introduce yourself to someone you don't know in this sanctuary...and because you took the time to greet them, they just might feel like they would be welcome in this church family.

Those would be excellent ways to spend your love today.

How many of you woke up this morning, and said, "I can't WAIT to spend my love on my enemies today!"???

You see, our text for today is one of the most difficult teachings that Jesus ever gave us:

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?"

In other words, if you just love your family, or your friends who feel like family, or the members of Westminster who are your church family, what credit is that to you?

"For even sinners love those who love them...But love your enemies, do good...expecting nothing in return."

***According to Jesus, we don't get to spend all our love on our family.
Or on our friends that might as well be family.***

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

Or on the stranger whom we want to welcome into this church family.

According to Jesus, we are required...not invited, but REQUIRED to spend some of our love on our enemies.

People we NEVER think of as part of our family.

Now someone here may say, well...I don't have any enemies.

Ok...but surely there is someone in your life that you find difficult to love. How about the person who is on the opposite side of the political aisle from you, and they are ARROGANT and OBNOXIOUS about what they believe?

How easy is it for you to love the person in your life...who is narcissistic, and needy...and you're always finding yourself to be impatient, when you're around that person for five minutes?

Love our enemies?
Bad idea, Jesus.

In fact, there are times, as a pastor, when I would counsel someone to simply IGNORE this idea.

When a person is in an abusive relationship, they shouldn't just turn the other cheek. They should seek help, get out of the relationship. And after that person has left the relationship, I do not know how that person...is supposed to "love [the] enemy."

But even if we're not talking about domestic abuse, this commandment from Jesus...I wish he hadn't said it. Because it raises the stakes in ALL our relationships, all our interactions with other people.

A number of years ago, my wife and I had one of our vehicles break down on us. The gages on the dashboard stopped working. It had happened 7 months earlier, same problem, so we took it back to the same shop, figuring the problem would get fixed free of charge since it wasn't fixed correctly the first time.

After all, we had put \$1,500 in the first time, surely it was their mistake.

The shop came back and said—no, even though the symptoms are exactly the same, the cause is different—they wanted an additional \$1,100.

We were pretty mad.

We were convinced that they made a mistake the first time, and now instead of admitting their error, they were trying to swindle us out of more money.

I got on the phone with the shop manager, and among other things, I told him what he was doing was dishonest and greedy. I told him I would spread the bad word about his shop all over town.

“Be careful, now...”

I said, “What are doing, threatening me?”

On and on I went...

I admit, I got a little carried away on the phone that day.
It’s been over 10 years, and I can still picture that manager:

I see him as a swindler, as a liar,
as a selfish, sad individual.

But this morning, Jesus wants me to get a different picture of him in my mind.

And to see him not as a scam artist and a cheat,
but as God’s child, God’s precious one,
as a person who is part of my family.

I don’t know if I can do it.
Can I do it?
I’m not sure I can do it.

Maybe the problem is this.

Maybe when it's time to love our enemies, maybe we shouldn't start with our enemies. Maybe we should start with God.

After all, that's what Jesus did.

Jesus did not say, "Love your enemies, because really, they've had a rough life and there are all sorts of reasons that they are who they are, and if you love them hard enough, I promise you that they will change."

Jesus did not say that.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies...and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."

In other words, love your enemies, because it's already in God's nature to love them. And we are to be imitators of God, to love in a way that is as wild and expansive and forgiving as God.

I don't know if I can do it.

You see, if I'm going to love someone who is difficult to love, I want to know that eventually, my love will make a difference. That by turning the other cheek, by giving them not only my coat but also my shirt, it will make a difference.

A story was told on NPR's *Morning Edition* a number of years ago.

Julio Diaz, 31 years of age, was a social worker in New York City. Every day, on his way home from work, Diaz ended his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, as Diaz stepped off the train and onto the platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

A teenager approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the kid his wallet.

As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy.
“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

Diaz replied, “Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner... and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome.”

Remarkably, the teenager agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, the waiters came by to greet Julio Diaz.

“Do you own this place?” the would-be-assailant asked Diaz.

“No,” Diaz replied, “I just eat here a lot.”

The teenager responded, “But you're even nice to the dishwasher.”

“Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?” Diaz asked him.

“Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way,” he said.

Diaz, the social worker saw an opening.
He asked this young man what he wanted out of life.

“He just had...a sad face,” Diaz said.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, “Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill ‘cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you.”

The teen “didn't even think about it” and handed over the wallet.

Then they made another exchange.
Diaz gave the teenager \$20, and he gave Diaz his knife.³

³ From www.npr.org, “A Victim Treats His Mugger Right,” 3-28-08. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for calling my attention to this story.

Now what's the postscript to that story?

What I wish is that the story ended with a follow up 10 years later. And the young man who stole the money not only stopped robbing people, he graduated from high school and college and earned his Master's and now he's a social worker too, works with troubled teens whose lives hang in the balance...all because of that one encounter with Julio Diaz.

That's what I wish happened.
Is that what happened to him?

We don't know.
Who knows what happened to that teenager.

The God we know in Jesus Christ is a God who loves with ABANDON, no matter how people respond to God...just think about the parable of the prodigal son...

The father throws a party for the prodigal, and...
we don't know if the elder son ever joins the party;
we don't know whether the prodigal mends his ways after the party.

And this is the problem. The God we know in Jesus Christ is a God who loves ALL God's children, even if they do not change, if when they do not love God back.

In other words, our God is...

- A God who came not just for the righteous, but for the unrighteous.
- A God who was born not just for blind Bartimaeus who followed Jesus, but for the rich ruler who decides he cannot follow Jesus.
- Our Savior died...not just for the disciples, but also for the Pharisees...and for Pontius Pilate...and for King Herod...

This is the difficulty with loving God, is it not?

Because it's much easier to love a God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked. It's much easier to love a God who loves our neighbors and hates our enemies.

It's much harder to love a God who throws PARTIES for the prodigal,
 who forgives his own executioners,
 who turns the other cheek
 and who CHASES lost sheep.

It's much harder to love that kind of God...
 unless, of course, you are the lost sheep.

Unless you find that one day, you are the prodigal.

Getting back to that confrontation with the auto shop owner from all those years ago...I've had some time to think. And I suppose the possibility exists that I was wrong. That he was right. That there really were two separate problems, and they required two different solutions for our vehicle.

Sometimes I wonder...what if I got done chewing him out on the phone, and he went home to tell his wife about his lousy day because some knucklehead called him a liar and a cheat?!

And what if –
 what if he went to his church the following Sunday...
 and during his prayers, he prayed for me.

What if that day—I was HIS enemy?
 What if that day—I was the person who was difficult to love?

I won't ever see him again, but the day may come when I'll run across somebody else.

Someone who lies to me,
 or tries to do some other harm to someone I love.

And I'll hear these words from Jesus: Love your enemy.

I don't know if I can do it.

Can I do it?

I'll try, but I'm not sure I can do it.

To act with restraint, when I really want to strike.

To hold my tongue, when I'd rather chew somebody out.

That's why I'm glad you're here.

I've got you.

My family.

My church family.

You are the people who can call me to account, when I'm inclined to keep my love NARROW and SMALL.

Every week, you are the people who are here to show me the INCLUSIVE, forgiving, EXPANSIVE nature of God's love. You are the people God has placed in my life who can teach me how to love—

not just the people I WANT to love,

but how to love the people I don't want to love...

Thank God I've got a family like you.

Amen.