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For Those Who Abuse You
Sermon on Psalm 37 and Luke 6:27-38
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The passage I am about to read is at the heart of Christian teaching. This is Jesus, addressing the huge crowd that has gathered around him and his disciples. People have heard about this strange man who heals people and says things nobody has ever said before, and they're desperate to be near him. They're gathered in a wide open space in the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and they have settled in, hoping for some good news, hoping Jesus' healing power will touch them. Jesus has already launched his message with some startling words: BLESSED are you who are poor, hungry, grieving, and looked down on. And watch out, those of you who are rich, full, happy, and popular. Today's scripture continues Jesus' message (read Luke 6:27-38). . .

Before talking about what this passage means for us today, let's talk about what it does NOT mean. Giving to everyone who begs from you does NOT mean leaving your doors unlocked and walking around with your purse unzipped or your wallet dangling out of your pocket. Loving our enemies doesn't mean we skip background checks on employees and volunteers who work at the church, especially those who work with children. Nor does any part of this teaching mean that it is wrong to feel angry sometimes, or wrong to express our anger, as long as we do it in a healthy, responsible way.

This teaching does not mean that we should not work for a more just society. [If men and women before me hadn't done that, I would not have the role I have today in this church, and the *Brown v. Board of Education* Museum would not exist.] It also doesn't mean that we shouldn't hold people accountable for bad behavior. Most of all, it doesn't mean we have to stay in an

abusive relationship. By all means, pray for those who abuse you, but get out of there, and don't feel guilty about it.

So what does it mean?

Let's talk for a minute about snacks. If I could, I would snack on cheese and crackers and chocolate covered almonds all day. But this is not a healthy way to eat, at least, not in the quantities that I tend to consume. I mean, it's better than a bag of Cheetos, but not as good as plain, non-fat, non-sweet Greek yogurt. Apparently, plain, non-fat, Greek yogurt is an ideal snack because it's high in protein, and low in fat and sugar. But it's so sour that it's just no fun to eat. I mean, bleah. I used to pass it in the grocery store and wonder whose tastebuds were distorted enough to eat this stuff.

The injustice in our world is enough to sour anybody. Just this weekend, we could read or hear in the news about the injustice of military families who have been getting ill due to toxic chemicals that the military has leached into their drinking water for decades now. Or the prolonged, and shameful failure of both the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention to deal appropriately with the sexual abuse of children at the hands of male clergy. Or what about the situation in Venezuela, with all of that aid sitting at the border. . .

Closer to home, every one of us can probably think of someone who has treated us unfairly, or worse yet, hurt somebody we love. Somebody who at this moment is getting away with it, who doesn't seem to be paying anywhere near the price they should, for the hurt they've caused. To be told to love this person is like eating a big mouthful of nonfat, plain Greek yogurt. Maybe it's good for us, maybe it's good for the world, but it doesn't taste very good.

A couple weeks ago, I took some plain, non-fat, Greek yogurt and put some blackberries in it. It was AMAZING. The natural sugar of the blackberries made the yogurt taste rich and

creamy, instead of sour, and the sourness of the yogurt made the berries taste like candy. It worked with blueberries and strawberries, too.

When I read this classic teaching of Jesus all by itself—love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you, give to those who beg from you—it’s a little sour, like non-fat plain Greek yogurt. It can make you gag. But if you hold it next to Psalm 37, it’s like mixing in a cup of berries. Magic begins to happen!

The psalmist says, “Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass . . . TRUST in the Lord, and do good, and so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.” Verse after verse he encourages us: “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in HIM, and HE will act. HE will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday,” and on and on he goes, the key concept being that it’s a waste of time and energy to simmer with resentment towards the people who have hurt us. Because GOD will take care of it. Stop stewing, and let it go, because no matter how righteous we may feel, only GOD has the whole scoop on anybody. God will make things right in God’s good time.

I think I’ve shared before that when my girls were little, they loved going to the Deanna Rose Farm in Overland Park, and looking at all the different animals. I would always bring a bunch of quarters with me, so they could get those little food pellets and feed the goats, and the ducks and the geese. It was important to me to bring lots of quarters, so we could get lots of pellets, and both girls could feed the animals to their hearts’ content. I delighted in helping the girls have this experience of abundance—they could be as generous as they wanted, with those animals, knowing that when they ran out of pellets, Mommy would have more quarters. Usually,

they would be ready to stop feeding the animals well before I ran out of quarters. Or the animals would have had enough, and wander off.

The point being, we have more than enough. We have all the grace, all the love, all the strength, and all the security we need, to love, forgive, bless, and pray. If it feels like we're running low, God is always right there, with more quarters. When somebody does something unjust, and seems to be getting away with it, it feels like this takes something away from us. It does NOT. [That's between them and God. If it is our job to hold someone accountable, that's one thing—but retaliation and retribution are not ours to give.]

When we live in this way of Christ, it blesses US. Yes, it's good for the world, too. But it's really, really, really good for US. To love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, to pray for those who ABUSE us, yes, even those—is to live with freedom, because our peace will not depend on how others treat us. It's like that feeling at the end of the day, when you come home and you take off your stiff shoes, and you unbutton your tight collar and take off your heavy belt, and you put on your sweat pants and soft, fuzzy slippers, and your favorite fleecy sweatshirt . . . mmmm.

Now, I haven't forgotten. This winter, we've been reflecting on our new mission statement—say it with me—“Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose.” We've been paying special attention to that last part, “Living with purpose.” Living with purpose means following Christ, doing what he did, living as he lived, and following his teachings. Our purpose is to become more like him. As a church, that means our job is to practice forgiveness, and loving our enemies. To get so good at it that it's second nature, like the Amish community that forgave the man who stormed into their one room schoolhouse and shot ten girls in 2007, killing five of them.

In this time when our nation seems so divided, so eager to pounce on those who see things differently—the world needs the church to step up its game.

The good news is that in a church, we can help each other out. Nobody has to do this alone. I remember there was a time when I could not pray for my ex-husband. I couldn't do it. He had hurt me, and I really wanted him to suffer. I wasn't actively plotting revenge-- I just couldn't pray for him. But my mom could. So she did. We do that for each other, when we're a church family.

My challenge to you this week, and I will do this, too, is to picture someone who doesn't like you. Or somebody YOU don't like. Somebody who really gets under your skin. Somebody you avoid as much as possible.

Now, I want you to pray for this person every day this week. Every day. Once in the morning, once at night. Hold them in the light and love of God, and pray for them. As Jesus said to that great crowd so long ago, "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."

Let us pray together . . .