

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • FEBRUARY 24, 2019

Psalm Litany

Based on Psalm 37

Do not concern yourself with the deeds of evildoers;
they soon wither like the grass.

**Take delight in the Lord,
who gives you your heart's desire.**

Commit your way to the Lord
and you will be led to pure light.

**Be still, wait patiently
and the Lord will direct our steps.**

Let us pray:

**Help and deliver us, O Lord,
for in you we seek refuge. Amen.**

The Scripture

Luke 6:27-36

“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.

The Message

Expecting Nothing in Return

Nick Larson

The writer of the Gospel of Luke is, among other things, a storyteller. He is a storyteller, who sets out to tell the truth concerning a man's life. This man, Jesus is, among other things, a great teacher.

This teacher seems solely focused. He teaches about the coming kingdom of God. That's what this sermon by the great teacher is all about.

This storyteller wants us all to pay close attention to this teacher. Earlier, Luke tells us that Jesus began his public ministry by reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. It is a text about the coming compassionate reign of God to the whole world. Luke is portraying Jesus as the great equalizer. After Jesus calls his twelve disciples, he heals, he teaches, then goes up on the mountain to pray. Then, *having come down*, he stands on a *level place* in order to preach a sermon to the disciples that he means for all people to hear and heed. This is a critical detail that Luke is showing us.

Matthew wants his readers to see Jesus as the new Moses, literally bringing the Word of God from the mountain, reclaiming the Commandments from Sinai. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus preaches from the mountain. Yet, Luke's Jesus preaches on the plain.

Rev. Dena Williams calls this the "great leveling, the great equalization." There is a great leveling of many things in Luke: the mountain becomes the plain; you who are poor receive the riches of the kingdom; you who weep will laugh (6:20-23).

The leveling continues in the middle section of Jesus' sermon, our verses for today. Enemies are not only to be forgiven, but like friends, are to be loved, blessed, and prayed for. Turn your cheek, give your coat, hand over your shirt, to anyone, for all are equal, enemies and friends.

In Luke's gospel, he gives Christ's words a rhythm and repetition. The hearer has no opportunity to miss the point: "If you love those...If you do good...If you lend to those..." Form follows function for the preacher on the plains. The words are repeated as the deeds they describe are to be enacted *repeatedly*, spoken, or performed not once, but over and over again, shaping lives, speaking a rhythm of love and forgiveness and generosity throughout every moment of every day. Jesus' sermon here beautifully follows a rhythm, not letting the listener linger long enough on any to get lost, instead showing that each is connected to the last.

Rhythm reminds me of one of my favorite images of God.

Years ago, when I was serving as a youth pastor in Indiana, this really cutting-edge thing happened. This guy in Michigan started releasing video sermons, ten-minute DVDs that would deliver "on-demand" teachings. This was before the days of YouTube, or Vimeo, or online video in any form. One of those teachings by Rob Bell introduced me to an image of God that has always stuck with me: God as song.

God as a song that moves me. It has a melody; it has a groove. It has a certain rhythm. And people have heard this song for thousands and thousands of years across continents and cultures and time periods, and each found it captivating. And they've wanted to hear more.

There have always been people who say there is no song, and who deny the music, but the song keeps playing. And so, Jesus came to show us how to live in tune with the song.

Like, "He is the way, the truth, and the life." This isn't a statement about how one religion is better than all the others. It's about how things truly are. It's about Jesus being God taking on flesh and blood, and picking up an instrument to show us how to play this song.

In his generosity, in his compassion, that's what God's like. In his telling of the truth, that's what God is like. In his justice and inclination to the poor, that's what God is like. In his love and forgiveness, and sacrifice, that is what God's like.

That's who God is. That's how the song goes.

And this song is playing all around us, all the time. The song is playing everywhere. It's written on our hearts. And everybody is playing the song.

The question isn't whether or not you are playing a song. The question is: Are you in tune?

Like it's written in the book of Acts. It says that, "God gives us life, and breath, and everything else." God is generous. So, when I'm selfish and stingy and I refuse to give, I'm essentially out of tune with the song.

Later, in one of John's letters, he says that God is love; unrestrained...unconditional love. So, when you see somebody sacrifice themselves for another, for the well-being of somebody else, it's like they are playing in the right key. That's why it is so inspiring and powerful. They are in tune with the song.

Now other people know all sorts of stuff about music. They know stuff about pitch, and modes, and keys, and instruments. Like Deb and Kristi, they can hear things that maybe other people don't. They hear subtly and nuance in the song; they appreciate things that other people might miss in the song.

But it's also possible, to be so caught up in the technical aspects of the song, that you miss the pure and simple enjoyment of the song. There are plenty of people who talk, as if they know everything about being a Christian, and yet they can seem out of tune.

And then there are others, who say they don't know much at all about the Christian faith. Yet they can seem very in-tune with the song.

Jesus is saying to us, with this long list of things for us to do, and teaching about how to act and react, is that too often we stop listening to the song. We become too selfish. This is enslaving. These are our chains that prevent us from being free with ourselves, free with other human beings, and free in the whole context of life.

These statements, these instructions from the preacher of the plain, are God showing us the rhythms and the patterns that God is calling us to. It seems to me that what Jesus is after in this "expect nothing in return" line is the question of how do I feel when I offer this to the Lord?

Does the way I am living day-to-day correspond to the deepest desire of my heart? Am I ordering my days around the purposes God has for me? Am I saying "No" courageously that enable me to put first things first? What are those first things, and are there any changes that need to be made, so that I can live the life God has for me?

These are the questions that need to be asked in solitude. These are the examinations of retreat. Jesus, through Luke, is asking us to live a selfless life.

So, perhaps you are like me, and you see this rhythmic section of Jesus' teachings and you think to yourself, "How can I ever do those things? How can I give to all, lend, forgive, not strike back? It all seems so impossible. Isn't it just a ridiculous teaching?"

That's when I want you to think of this new image of God. Listen for the song. It's about getting in tune with what God is already doing all around you.

That song is playing right here, right now. It's present in every moment with you, as close as your breath itself.

This is where one of my favorite ways of examining the gospels comes back into play. Remember how I told you Matthew was trying to tell us that Jesus is the new Moses, the teacher who is bringing new commandments into the world? Matthew does everything, stopping just short of putting a literal staff into Jesus' hands so that it, too, can turn into a snake, to tell us that Jesus is the new Moses set to lead Israel out of bondage once more. Matthew is wanting us to see the Beatitudes taught from the mountain as the Ten Commandments being brought down to us.

And yet, Luke is doing something different. Luke doesn't have Jesus on the mountain teaching from on high. Luke says that we are all equal, that we can do this, too. Luke is putting this staff of Moses, the staff of leadership into our hands. Luke is telling us that

Jesus wants each of us to learn to play this song, too! All of us, together, is how we can do this.

In solitude, each of us can see ourselves as God's beloved, loved. When we learn to know our true created self, the one beyond all those stones and shadows, the one at our center. When we find that person, when we listen to the song playing all around us. We can't help but to love our enemies. We can't help but to turn our other cheek. We want to give the shirt off our back, because we want nothing more than to join into playing the song.

The gift of the necessity of time away with God comes in realizing that we don't need anything in return. It is because we already have everything we need. We can hear the song. When we pay close attention and listen to the song, we get swept up in it. The pure enjoyment of it, spills out into our every interaction.

There is no enemy, only other musicians, when we are playing the song. When we dance and move, when we add in our own musical sounds, when we layer our own beat and movement to the rhythm of God, we discover that humanity can and needs to be more like an orchestra, or a giant choir. Each voice or instrument is adding to the richness of the song.

In the rhythms of rest and return, in the movement from solitude into community and then into ministry, we are surprised that we can do it without expecting anything. *There is a surprise waiting for you when you graciously act expecting nothing in return.*

Luke, the storyteller, seems to want us to see Christ as a kind and gentle teacher, who promises great and unexpected reward. The great equalizer points out that all are equal, all are children of the Most High. The compassionate healer of this Gospel attributes kindness and mercy to God. Luke's Jesus seeks to bring forth the kingdom of God and persuasively invites hearers to live into the future which God is calling them.

Jesus is telling us that we can play this song, too. We can achieve this ethic of generosity even in our hostile world, because when we know that we are blessed, we give. Our song is full of love, blessing, and giving. Hearing this song changes everything.

Matthew seems to want us to live righteously, which is a sermon for another day. And yet Luke, especially in contrast to Matthew, allows us to see God's grace. This preacher of the plain, seeks to shape the future and to bring about this kingdom of God not by demands and threats, but by gentle persuasion. Luke's Jesus models in word and deed the compassion of a loving God for all people.

The great reward we receive when doing these acts Jesus invites us to do, is not full pockets, garages, or self-esteem, but who we become in the process. Jesus promises us freedom. Jesus knows full well that we will never love our enemies without an amazing grace that transforms us and makes us different than we are. Like the musician, who learns and practices their craft, we also can become more than the sum of our parts.

It is not good enough to just talk about these things. We need to practice. We need to find ways of getting in tune with the song. When the teachings of the Sermon on the Plain are joined with God's abundance, turning the other cheek becomes an act of resistance to evil that has the power to transform yourself, others, and the world.

So, may you come to see that the song is already written on your heart. As you live in tune with the song, in tune with the Creator of the universe, may you realize you are in relationship with the living God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.