

Sermon for February 24, 2019
“Knowing God: Generosity”

Luke 6:27-38

How do we know God? Since the beginning of the year we have been asking this question. The Magi showed us that God is being revealed for all, but that we often fail to see or hear God's communications. Jesus' baptism shows us that God calls and claims us and reveals God. The miracle of the water being turned to wine shows us that we know God through the Holy Spirit and the new life the Spirit gives. Jesus' first sermon in his home town shows us that we know God through the nature of Jesus call to preach Good News to the poor, freedom for the imprisoned, sight for the blind and liberation for the oppressed. 1 Corinthians 13 shows that we know God through God's love for us and participating in God's love for others. Last week we saw that we know God through wrestling with difficult Bible passages.

This week I want to look at how we know God through generosity. The fashion today is to talk about generosity as a way of speaking about stewardship. This is natural. When we think of generous people, we think of those who give to charity. But generosity is much deeper than that. You can be generous with your money, but you can also be generous with your compliments. You can be generous with your attention or with your concern.

Generosity is a spiritual category. The passage we read today is about generosity. It is generosity in grace and action. And it reveals to us God's generosity. This generosity may affect our use of money, but it impacts on so many other parts of our lives.

There is a lot in this passage. Much of it is familiar: turn the other cheek..., love your enemies..., pray for those who persecute you..., do unto others..., Give and it will be given to you... I could take the time to unpack every one of these statements. They say so much! I could even make a sermon series out of this!

You know how I put a key verse into the bulletin. Sometimes I have trouble figuring out which of the verses in the reading are the key ones, but not today. The key verse here is verse 36: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” That sums up all the other verses.

It is all about God's mercy; God's generosity. All the different things that this passage says are expressions of God's great mercy. They grow out of a sense of generosity in mercy. Generosity is defined as giving more of something than is necessary. God gives us more mercy and grace than any of us deserve.

Let's just look at one of these sayings: “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” This is about more than a hand to the face. We even use that as an expression: “That was a slap in face.” It refers to any wrong done to a person. This saying of Jesus is not limited by the number of physical cheeks you have on your face. It is about returning love for hate ultimately. So the next time someone insults you or disrespects you instead of doing the same back to them, you “Turn the other cheek.”

Consider it from God's perspective. How many times have we slapped God in the face? Every time we called ourselves Christians and then did something un-Christ-like, it was a slap in God's face. Every time we gave thanks over our food and did not try to help those who were hungry, it is a slap in God's face. Every time we accepted God's forgiveness, and then failed to forgive another, it was a slap in God's face.

Yet God who is generous in mercy keeps turning the other cheek. God keeps forgiving and blessing. God sees us humans mistreating and disrespecting one another when we were all created in God's image, and God hurts, but God is so merciful that God even came to pay the price for all our slaps in the face. God turned the other cheek for all time by coming in Jesus to die on the cross.

Just you try to top that! I mean it, try! You won't succeed, but you will do a lot of good in the process.

What about this one: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." At this verse I have to make the point that this is not a divine sanction to be abused. If you are in an abusive situation you deserve to be free of it. Leave, because you are a child of God created in God's image and you should be respected. Go to a friend or to a shelter, or anywhere. What this is saying is that when we are wronged and hated and abused, we should not return that with wrong and hate and abuse. We should love and even pray for those who are our enemies.

Maybe a good way to explain this is by contrasting Jesus and Jonah. You remember the story of Jonah? God told him to go to Nineveh to preach the word. But the Ninevites were Jonah's enemy, so he went in the other direction. That's why God sent a whale, or big fish, to swallow him and take him there. He hated the Ninevites for the wrong they did to him so much that he did not want to preach God's word to them because they might repent.

Jesus on the other hand came into this world and ministered to all. He preached to the rich and the poor; to the faithful and the unfaithful. He even reached out to the Roman centurion and prayed for the people that nailed him to a cross. On the cross he prayed "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." That's a God who is generous in mercy and forgiveness!

God's generosity in mercy and grace is amazing. You know what it is like? When I was a teenager we had an old car that my sister and I shared. It was a 1970 falcon. My Jr year of high school, I would drive it to school and back. One day I was driving home from band practice and I was giving a friend a ride home. It was drizzling a little I was going a little "too fast for conditions" and I lost control of the car and ended up hitting a telephone pole.

The car was totaled. Don't worry, no one was hurt. The car was old so a new bumper and radiator was enough to total the car. No one was hurt and the car was fixable, but I was devastated.

Friday rolled around and I needed to get to the stadium for the football game. I put on my uniform and got my horn and went out to the living room. My sister was sitting on the couch reading a book, my Father was in his chair watching the news and my mother was in the kitchen cleaning up from dinner. I announced, "It's time to go to the game. Who's going to drive me?" There was a moment of silence and then my dad said, "I'm not going anywhere. You can take my car." Now that's grace!

God gave us our life and our soul. Sometimes we wreck that life. But God is merciful and gracious. God is generous to love us when we act hatefully, forgiving even when we fail to forgive; to turn the other cheek. God gives us love and forgiveness and helps us to get back on our feet again.

Jesus said, "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." God is generous with us, and we should follow God's example and try to be generous with others. We are children of the Most High after all. God is generous always giving more than is necessary or customary.

God is generous. When we act generously to others, no matter what it is in, we are following God's example. It may be giving a 30% tip instead of the customary 15%, or it may be praying for the one that stole from you or forgiving the one that wrongfully hurt you. When we do that, we participate in God's generous mercy for all humanity. If you want to know God, then be generous as your Father in heaven is generous.