

Luke 6:27-38

27 “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you;

28 bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.

29 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.

30 Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again.

31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

35 Instead, 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 himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

When Trees Tap-dance

It’s tax season! Or at least it’s tax season for those of us who don’t want to wait for the last minute. Okay, it’s tax season for one or two of us. But you get the picture, tax season is in sight. What that really means is we have to take account. If we’ve earned a wage for services performed, our employer will send us documentation of the exact amount. We’ll also collect all sorts of receipts detailing monies earned from interest, or monies distributed for certain expenses and donations. We’ll tally it all up. And on or before April 15th, we’ll need to settle up with the IRS. If we owe more taxes than we’ve paid, we’ll send them a check. If they owe us (please Baby Jesus make be it so!), they’ll send us a check, though not as promptly as they expect us to send one to them. Regardless, it’s a zero-sum-gain. And it’s pretty darn predictable. For the great majority of us, we’ll get what we are entitled to and not a penny more.

I wonder if that’s why the whole country goes bonkers over March Madness? On the opposite end of the spectrum, here’s an entirely unpredictable event, and in most years, everyone from the players to the coaches to the fans, even the referees, fail to receive what they are entitled to. A top-seeded team can have an off night and be eliminated by an inferior team in an instant. One mistake in the wrong moment of the game can have the effect of ten in less intense moments. In some instances, the team with the statistical advantage in shooting

percentage and rebounds will actually end up with fewer points than the other team. A coach with thirty years of experience and hard-earned success can spend an entire career and never make the Final Four. A thirty-year-old coach from a directional school with a sub-.500 record can catch fire and write themselves into history. And best of all, a two-year-old can fill out a bracket, picking winners sheerly based on the names they like the best, and win the office pool. It all balances out, just not on a balance sheet.

The author of Luke's gospel writes about their own time and context, somewhere in the Roman empire in the late first century. But truth be told, this gospel could just as easily have been written in our own time. Luke's world revolves around patronage. There's an intricate system of patron and clients. Patrons provide for the clients in their own little ecosystems, and their clients depend on their provisions. I give you this. Now you are indebted to me. Every patron is also the client of a large patron right on up to the emperor. In such a world, everyone is preconditioned to be level, or square, or even. Everyone's entire focus is on maintaining this exhausting sense of equilibrium.

If this is the system you inherit, seeking to balance the favor of employer, or householder, or parent, or partner, or friend, or neighbor, or really any relationship, how could you or would you imagine any other kind of relationship with God? Surely, the One who created us must also keep some kind of cosmic ledger, right?!?

"No! Absolutely not!" Luke's author tells us. God is not a finite entity. Therefore, God has no need to operate in a system of checks and balances. God's restorative actions are not beholden to the predictable and limited possibilities of Caesar's.

Last week, Jesus preached to the congregation about a series of blessings and woes. Most of these statements are communal in nature. The communities that lack provisions, that grieve, that are hungry, that find themselves alienated in the present will be made whole in God's world. The communities that enjoy the artificial abundance of Caesar's world receive their consolation now, but they ought not to expect such imbalance in God's world. If we hear this news with Caesar's ears, it's quite jarring. If we hear this news with the ears of Jesus, it's anything but. God's enough-ness and God's re-accounting more than offsets the ledger.

If last week's message focused on communal action, this week's is a bit more individual and granular. But remember, it's individuals all practicing together in community. What is our response to those who aggrieve and victimize us? Caesar's world, with ledger at the ready, beckons us to hate those who hate us, abuse those who choose to abuse us, return violence with violence, turn away those who beg from us, because Lord knows we'll never see a return on that investment.

But Jesus beckons us to love. Not as an act of weakness, or indifference, or martyrdom. But as an act of power. When we love those who hate us, pray for those who curse us, turn the cheek to those who strike us, and give openly to those who beg of us, we are loosening the binds of the ledger. We may even be ripping it apart. We are choosing to no longer participate in a world that makes every action one of patronage and dependence. We are also choosing not to mimic the very practices that have made us victims. We are ending a perpetual chain of violence and beginning a chain of restoration and healing.

Jesus is also quick to remind us that many of the things we credit ourselves for doing in Caesar's system, our enemies do as well. It's not

all that hard to love people who love you. And it's not all that hard to lend money with an expectation of receiving some kind of interest. If we're honest, it's also not all that hard to for us to imagine that our enemies love people they love and pursue dealings that benefit their prospects. But imagine the generosity and depth of those who choose to simply love, and give, and offer of themselves, even to those whom they consider enemies. It's the kind of stuff that upsets the ledger. It's also indicative of a God whose love, grace, and possibilities are generous beyond our imagination.

We've been trained to see what systems trains us to see. Strength, power, and resources dictate outcomes, but also serve as a measuring stick of value, morality, and capability. When that happens, it's hard to see transcendent outcomes.

More than 40 years ago, on the eve of the 1983 national championship, Dave Kindred of *The Washington Post* wrote:

Trees will tap-dance, elephants will drive at Indy and Orson Welles will skip lunch before North Carolina State finds a way to beat Houston in the NCAA's college basketball championship game Monday night.

After a last second dunk, an improbable upset, and too many empty beer cans on Hillsborough Street to count, Kindred would write on Tuesday morning: "Trees tap-danced, elephants drove at Indy, and Orson Welles skipped lunch."

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not comparing a basketball game to the inbreaking of God's realm, any more than I am suggesting Carolina's win the year prior was evidence of the apocalypse.

I only suggest that the mechanisms and systems of this world often prevent us from seeing the possible. Caesar speaks the word *should*. Caesar likes imperatives. There *should* be a zero at the end of this ledger, and I'm gonna make it so. Gods speaks of what can and will be. "Remember, I'm the God of abundance, not balance," God says. "And besides, I'm not a construct, indivisible, and without value. I'm something that can be shared with everyone, add value to everyone, transform everyone."

Multiply any quantity or entity times Caesar's zero, and you know what you'll get? Zero. Because Caesar has nothing of lasting value to give you. But step into God's system, based on One, or Oneness, an odd sort of number. No, the ledger doesn't like the number one. But multiply yourself times God's one, and you'll always be you, the whole you, God's you.

In God's world, we really can love our enemies, share our resources, and end the patterns of senseless and stubborn brokenness our systems create. Sure, in today's polarized world such visions seem as likely as tap-dancing trees and racecar-driving elephants. But love and hope, expressed in ordinary moments, and offered with consistent repetition are peculiar things. They don't seek zeros, they seek abundance. And it seems to me that anything is possible in God's abundance.

Let's grab our dancing shoes. Maybe the tress, and elephants, and even our enemies will join us.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.