

“Down Side Up Living”

Message by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

7th SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

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Today’s gospel lesson is taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 38 through 48. I’ll be reading from Eugene Peterson’s translation *The Message*. “Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.”

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.”

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.” This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray. God you have this way of turning the tables

upside down, convincing us to do double face turn arounds, and to make a reverse change in direction no matter where we're standing. Continue to convince our hearts and bend our wills. During every moment we live we're faced with many choices. We can love, or we can be indifferent. Shape the new hearts you've given us. Open our ears and turn up the volume. Create a deep silence in this place as we focus on what you would have us hear. Give us understanding. Amen.

Jesus came to earth and turned all our thinking upside down. Jesus the King THEE King born in a feeding trough? Jesus was a different kind of King. He said things like love your enemy. Do good to those who hate you. Stop hoarding money and give some of it away. Give and it'll be given back to you. This truly is down side up living. Okay, I get some of that stuff, and I don't have a problem with it, most of it, but loving my enemy wait a minute. Can we rethink this God?? If you haven't read the back cover of the bulletin yet turn to it now. Let me read it to you.

Yep, Jesus meant that when he said "Love your enemy." Jesus does say to love all people, yep, that means everybody. That means the family next door who has junk scattered all over their yard. That means the neighbor who shot your cat and crippled her forever. That means the supervisor who tied big leaf bags around your tail pipe, smashed out your fog lamps on your Z28 Camaro, gave you exactly 12 flat tires every year for years—so buying the tire insurance didn't do you any good. He tried to steal your dress blues so you'd get an Article 15, and he denied you promotions forever. What? That's not fair! You mean I have to love as God loves and not even have the privilege of taking offense? Did Jesus really mean that about loving everyone? Yep.

All that I just read—that's about me! That was my life 20 years ago. It was not fun. I did pray for that supervisor, but truly, I wanted him gone and out of my

life. He was mean and vengeful. He didn't want me to succeed. No matter what I did, he made it look bad. I just didn't handle him very well. I wanted God to get him and set him straight, and then move him out of my way. That never happened.

Some scholars call verses 43 to 48—the part about love—the most famous piece of the Sermon on the Mount. This is what the Christian's goal should be—to love our enemies. But what does that mean? It's not family love, or sexual love, or the love you might have for a friend. The word for this kind of love is what God calls *agape* love. It was a brand new Greek word Jesus brought into that cultures' understanding. It's 100%, totally and completely unconditional love. It's not based on how someone treats me. So when someone is rude to me, impatient, and talks down to me I refuse to let that capture my heart. I refuse to be influenced to feel disgusted or hateful. I don't allow bitterness to invade my thinking. My goal for them should be to let this *agape* love that comes to me directly from God's heart capture their heart.

Showing others *agape* love is not conditioned on how I'm treated. This kind of love isn't based on feelings or the other persons' feelings about me. It's based on a determination of the mind to think like God. We refuse to give in to bitterness. We reject resentment or malice to form in our heart. What we purpose to *do is* to love unconditionally regardless of all negative and hurtful words and actions that are hurled at us.

Now wait a minute God. Is this a reasonable demand you have goin on here? I mean, let's talk this over. Let's think about this again. If *you* insult me and I decide to insult you what happens? _____ Nothing positive that's for sure. Let's say I demean you and you're *patient* with me what happens? _____ Hmmm. I'm taken back a bit. I may not show it, but it had an effect on me. Over time, that kind of loving *can* change me. For you to love me

back is not the natural thing to do when I'm abusive, but it does reflect the character of God. And God's presence in the world changes people. It's not the words of God that change us totally, oh they can impact us, but we need to see action. It's the word that springs out of us into a behavior that people can see that impacts others. When we love as God loves it points to God's presence in the world. It's a testimony.

We're helping others realize God's presence when we evidence how God would love. As Eugene Peterson said, it's "our God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you." God calls us to be consistent in our thinking and doing. God says to be perfect and to strive for that high bar. Being perfect is about our direction. So when someone treats us inappropriately we work for their highest good by loving them. We realize that that person is one who Christ died for and one who Christ values highly. . . . They say the apple of a tree doesn't fall far from the tree. That's usually true. It means that children are not that different from their parents—usually. For us, God is our parent.

We are children of God. Let's respond with the love of God to others. Let's allow that love to move into our hands and feet through doing and giving to others. Let's command that love to affect our speech—to bless and show grace. When someone gives us a hard time, respond with prayer for the person, for then we're working out of our true selves, our God-created selves. This truly is down side up living. Lord God, our true lover, make your ways natural for us. Amen.