

What Are You Spreading?
Epiphany 7B: Luke 6.27-38
February 20, 2022
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During one of the down days after Christmas, Ardelle, and I decided to take a walk in the park with our daughter Kate. But omicron was barreling down the pandemic highway into Memphis. So, as we were leaving the house, I'd been texting with Calvary's senior warden, Anna Kathryn Word, about moving a vestry retreat planned for St. Columba onto Zoom. I was about as excited at the prospect as a boy whose birthday was supposed to involve a large cake at the Children's Museum. But instead, he's handed a paper hat and made to sit down to the same soggy corn flakes he's eaten for the past 364 breakfasts in a row.

Anna Kathryn, of course, had a much better attitude about the whole thing, which is why the retreat ended up being pretty wonderful. But that morning, she had been texting ideas about icebreakers to get the retreat started. It just so happened that at Vassar, where Kate went to college, "check in questions" had become de rigueur during the pandemic, so she offered a few as we walked. They could be as straightforward as "What are you listening to right now?" Or as odd as "What's your favorite texture?" One prof began an online class with, "What's the weather outside where you are, and what's your inside weather like?" Several earnest students missed that "inside weather" was meant to be metaphorical and typed "air conditioned" into the chat.

But, given our pandemic obsession with virus loads in the aerosols we expel, we agreed that the best check-in question of all was "What are you spreading?" We didn't use it at the retreat. But it's good, isn't it? What are you spreading? What leaks, or spreads, or sprays out from your life and into the world every day? Or what is it that you hope you're spreading? I think I might live a better life if someone asked me this on a regular basis. Wouldn't you? So this is me, asking: "What are you spreading?"

The question is actually not a bad way into Jesus's teaching in the sixth chapter of Luke. Beginning last Sunday, we've been hearing what's sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. There are clear similarities between it and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. And the difference in setting — we're told he "came down and stood on a level place" rather than tromping up a hill — and slight differences in details — the poor are just poor, not poor in spirit, as Katherine noted last week — the fundamental similarities and the curious differences combine to suggest that these really were essential ethical teachings of Jesus. Things he taught in different places to different crowds at different times. They constitute his fullest description of the way of life he would also live out, even to the cross.

Last week we also heard that, while the beatitudes are all blessedness in Matthew 5, in Luke chapter 6, each "Blessed are you" has a corresponding "Woe." Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated. But woe to the rich, the filled, the laughing, and the reputable. So, in the first half of the sermon, Jesus reverses our assumptions about what kinds of people should count themselves among God's blessed ones, and what kinds of people should watch out.

But then, in our reading today, he follows that with a teaching, not about our state or station in life, but how we are to act. How we are to live. It's a teaching about what your life and mine are supposed to spread, if we claim to be followers of Jesus.

"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."

There's a balancing of opposites here too, of course. There are enemies on either side of their enmities. There are haters and the hated, the ones flinging curses and the ones being cursed, those who abuse and strike and steal and there are those who are on the wrong end of all those wrongs. But what the beatitudes have done is say clearly that Jesus is talking to the people on the wrong end of the world's wrongs. He's talking to his blessed ones. And after seeming to say, "Woe to you wrongdoers, you're going to get what you've got coming to you," he turns to his people and says, "But they're not going to get it from you. Because you can't be Christian and get even. You can't be Christian and live trying to get your due. To be Christian is to give the world something entirely different from what the world has thrown at you."

In the middle verses of the passage, he explains what should be obvious to us. If you give back to the world what you've gotten from the world, what's so admirable about that? Or, put another way, if you spread only what you've caught — love, hatred, indebtedness, forgiveness ... whatever — if you spread the same stuff that was spread to you, nothing has changed in the world because you were in it. But each time someone gives something other than what they've received, spreads love to an enemy, spreads goodness to a hater, a blessing to someone muttering curses, forgiveness even to a thief ... every time that happens, a little link in a long and terrible chain snaps in two.

And the snap in that chain is Christianity. It's not an aspect of Christianity. It's not one feature of the way of Jesus. It is the heart of his way. For all that is strange and elusive in some of Jesus's teaching, the essence of his way is devastatingly clear. Love like God loves.

He reminds us that God doesn't give mercy to the world because the world has been merciful to God. God isn't kind because the world is kind. Kindness and mercy are what God spreads because of who God is, not because of who we are. All Jesus is asking us is to attempt to live out our own small and imperfect versions of the godly life. Which is to say, don't let what you spread be determined by what you've received from a violent and vengeful world. Spread what you have received from God, which is kindness. Which is mercy. Which is forgiveness.

I've been watching the Olympics a bit. And I'm proud to report that I'm just not that into it. But I do think I've finally come to understand the sport of curling. I'm still clueless about strategy and have no idea how the scoring works. But I'm pretty sure the ultimate purpose of curling is to make sports less interesting, which may just be a godly purpose. And I say this as someone who's still gloating about Arkansas's scrappy takedown of Tennessee on the basketball court yesterday.

The metaphors we live by in this culture are metaphors of battle, which sports are all relatively innocent versions of, but versions, nonetheless. What we're formed to believe is that life is a battle. That the best of us morally, economically, culturally, even religiously ... will be brought forth in some grand competition. Which is to say, the best of us comes forth as a fighting response to the ones we're opposed to. And, make no mistake. There is a vast, outrage industrial complex, if you will, with television channels and websites and algorithms all carefully designed to tell you who your enemies are. It will tell you whom to curse, whom to hate, whom to judge and whom to condemn. It's hard enough to love our enemies. David Waters and others are convincing me that it's past time that Christians limit or eliminate all these extra sources of rage and condemnation in the media we consume. Ask yourself truthfully if what you watch or read or listen to every day will help you live out the way of Jesus in Luke 6. If it won't, don't you think Jesus might want us to turn it off? Why take in only more of exactly what Jesus doesn't want his followers to spread?

So, what are you spreading? What are we spreading as Jesus's Church? Is it the same old judgment and condemnation the world's violent battles are made to arouse in us? Or does what we have to offer the world have a different source? A source that is mercy. A source that is love. Gift. Forgiveness. Give these away with your life, says Jesus, especially to your enemies and opponents, and these are what will come back to you and fill up your life. And when a good measure of some small mercy we've managed to give away, pressed down, shaken together, running over is put back into our laps, won't we wonder why we spent even a moment of these short and precious lives of ours spreading anything less?