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I had a hard time getting started on planning what to say today in response to Jesus' words. Last week we heard how Jesus reminded us how those struggling with life are blessed. Those were comforting words, for at some point, we all face difficulties and challenges. It's good to know that no matter what we face, Jesus continues to see us as blessed.

But this week his words push us a bit more—"love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Really, Jesus? You expect me to love those people who are hard to love? You want me to bless them? It's not easy to love some people.

These words of Jesus could easily be misused, such as telling an abused wife to love her husband and remain with him even when faced with harm, but that's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus suggested offering prayers—maybe that the abuser would learn to live a different way—but nowhere does Jesus suggest that one being abused should stay in that situation.

What about Jesus' suggestion to turn the other cheek when someone strikes you on the cheek? Some have interpreted this passage to mean that we become passive when faced with violence, but biblical scholar Walter Wink suggests that turning the other cheek meant a challenge to authority:

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior...The whole point of the blow was to force someone who was out of line back into place... By turning the cheek, the servant makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again: his nose is in the way. And anyway, it's like telling a joke twice; if it didn't work the first time, it simply won't work. The left cheek now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right fist; but only equals fought with fists...the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship... By turning the cheek, then, the "inferior" is saying: "I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won't take it anymore."¹

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It's not easy to love, but loving others doesn't mean we stop caring for ourselves, a point that Jesus suggested when he said, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." In other words, think about how you want to be treated, and then treat others in a similar way. Do you not like hearing unkind words? Then avoid saying something unkind to others. Do you not like to be ignored? Then avoid ignoring others. Do you not like people telling you what to do to fix your life? Then listen with compassion and avoid telling others what to do.

Interestingly, these words of Jesus, often called the Golden Rule,² echo in many religious traditions around the world. Jesus reflected his Jewish heritage, for in the Talmud we read that Rabbi Hilel said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Muslims remember when the prophet Muhammed said, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

Hindu scriptures say, "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you."

Buddhism reminds followers to "Trust not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."

Many other religious traditions have a similar teaching, for there's something about treating one another with respect and love that reverberates throughout the world. People of various faith traditions seem to have this common longing within us, even though it's often hard to love and we're tempted to label others as loveable or unlovable when they're not like us. Writer Henri Nouwen suggested that,

We are not sent to the world to judge, to condemn, to evaluate, to classify, or to label. When we walk around as if we have to make up our mind about people and tell them what is wrong with them and how they should change, we will only create more division. Jesus says it clearly: "Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge; ... do not condemn; ... forgive" (Luke 6:36-37). In a world that constantly asks us to make up our minds about other people, a nonjudgmental presence seems nearly impossible. But it is one of the most beautiful fruits of a deep spiritual life.³

Jesus invited us to "Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate." That's something we

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as Disciples of Christ strive to do, especially for those who face the most difficult times of life.

On Memorial Day 2019, tornadoes swept through the Miami Valley of Ohio, destroying thousands of homes and apartments and leaving a trail of downed trees and power lines in their wake. Many of the tornado-affected families have had to relocate multiple times since the tornadoes due to substandard housing conditions and inflated rent.

Two years after the storm, the Stephens family was still unable to find adequate living quarters. The family of ten was forced to live apart...The Stephenses, like so many other families, remained in temporary housing and separated, pending the completion of repairs.⁴

Through our annual Week of Compassion offering, our gifts helped them through the transition, as was the case with a more recent event.

In early December, tornadoes powered through much of western Kentucky, bringing widespread damage to homes, businesses, and churches. In the months since, Week of

Compassion has connected with pastors, congregations, and ecumenical partners to provide immediate response and prepare for long-term recovery.⁵

You may recall that when this recent disaster happened, I commented on Sunday morning, “We are already there, helping respond to those in need.” You see, our compassion and gifts given now keep going all year long.

As the Week of Compassion materials suggest: “Love is shelter. Love is a listening ear. Love is community. Love is a hopeful future. Love is a path forward. When all else seems lost, love remains.”

Even when it’s not easy to love, our church continues to model what that love looks like, what compassion means in a world that hungers for a listening ear and a helping hand. **(Show Week of Compassion video)**

¹ Walter Wink, *Jesus' Third Way*, www.cpt.org/files/BN%20-%20Jesus%20Third%20Way.pdf

² www.scarboromissions.ca/golden-rule/the-golden-rule-poster-a-history

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Essential Henri Nouwen* (Shambhala, 2009), 159-160.

⁴ www.weekofcompassion.org/stories/special-offering-mission-moment-dayton-oh

⁵ www.weekofcompassion.org/stories/hospitality-looks-different