

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

I'm sitting in the crowd, a little far away from Jesus and his disciples because I came late, but at least I finally get to listen to him. I've heard that this man is someone, who would change the lives of people. And I heard that he could heal and brighten up our days.

As Jesus speaks, my thoughts are spinning trying to understand what he means with his words:

<sup>27</sup> "But to you who are listening I say: *Love* your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you."

## LOVE

The words Jesus said right now, continue to echo in my head. The first thing is that Jesus calls his listeners to love. And this challenges me to think: What does it actually mean to love?

The commandment of love seems a heavy one. It is as heavy as a truck, heavy as a built-in wardrobe made of solid oak, it's like a large millstone around your neck.

But the commandment of love seems also a very light one. It's like an adornment of your clothes, like a shared coffee in a short break from work.

The commandment of love is something so familiar, but at the same time it's something so foreign to us.

Especially when it comes to loving your enemies. What does it mean to love the ones who betrayed you, those who ignored you, hurt you or have left you alone?

Maybe it's a little bit easier to picture this, when we think about the wounds they left.

If I had to name these wounds, it would be something like I was treated unjust, I was insulted, I was overlooked or even abandoned. And if someone comes again and treats me wrong or doesn't appreciate the way I'm trying to live my life, then I'm very fast in getting my inner weapons loaded...

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is inspired by thoughts from Christina Jeremias-Hofius, Birgit Mattausch, Sr. Christina Müller.

And then there are these other kinds of wounds in my life. Those involving my self esteem, scars that remind me how hard I can be to myself. These wounds make me turn myself into my own enemy, when mocking voices inside my head are telling me that I'm not good enough to do this and that, that I'm not smart enough, that I'm not strong or beautiful enough...

What does it mean to love my enemies, Jesus? He says: <sup>28</sup> “[B]less those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

With all your anger, your grief, your vengeance and your being unforgiven, you can't change the other and you won't have peace. Fight with my weapons, says Jesus, because only I have the power to change hearts and give the peace, humans can't find nor give.

Anytime you get angry, *bless* these people, who offend you. Bless your inner self that judges you trying to tell you that you'll never be enough.

To bless is to think outside the box, it is to go against your feelings and the affections of your heart. It might be a slow process with steps back and forward. But blessing your enemies will bring you back the freedom that has been placed into their hands. People who bless, are free people who count on the transforming love of God!

But, Jesus, how can I make this thing happen – how can I love my enemies? I got up now, standing in the crowd of all the people, everyone is staring at me.

I feel a little embarrassed putting myself on the spot, asking again and again the same question, but I feel that I really need to understand what's going on here. How can I love? Jesus turns around, he looks at me and he says: <sup>31</sup> “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Do to others as you would have them do to you. What would *you* like to have? How would *you* like to be treated?

Me? I think I would like to be accepted as the person that I am. That someone encourages me, that I can do it. That someone helps me to see and develop my talents. That someone honestly tells me when I did something well. Or that she or he tells me with love where I failed. I also want others to endure me.

When I said something inappropriate or even hurtful, that the person doesn't wipe me out right away, but endures it, and stays with me. How nice it is when I can ask someone for help without feeling bad about it. How even more beautiful it is, when others show grace when I misbehave. And it would be nice if I could learn to show my inner critical voices that they are loved...

Jesus says: It is in your hands. You can make these wishes become reality. Live what you dream of. Live for others.

## **FEAR**

But my FEAR. If I act so generously towards my enemies and those, who hurt me - what do I get out of this? If only there was not the fear of being neglected, when we acted generously. When we tried to live this dream. If only there was not the fear. Martin Luther King said: "Fear knocks on the door; the faith opens and no one enters." Does faith hinder fear from entering? And did Jesus recognize the fear among his listeners of being neglected? That even when trying to be generous, they might still come off badly?

In any case, Jesus continues:

<sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.

Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

## **MERCIFULNESS**

<sup>36</sup> "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "

The Good Samaritan comes into my mind. He cares for the beaten man on the street – a man from a people that see Samaritans as enemies– but the Samaritan shows generosity, pays all the bills, without asking for the man's account details (or PayPal). I think about the poor widow who gives her last two copper coins to the temple. She doesn't have anything left. How to love, Jesus, when everything is used up? No power left, no patience.

Even the little the widow had in her poverty is used up. What's the merit of all this? What do you get out of this?

You stand out. And <sup>35</sup> “your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” And then you’ll stand out. People will remember you, because you act differently. That’s what you get out of it. You’ll stand out as a positive example, when you start to live this way. To love God. The children. The old, the sick, the poor and the excluded.

To love means also to care. To care in the hospitals, the retirement homes, the refugee camps. To care means to love. Partners, parents, daughters and sons. At home, in the neighborhood, in the voluntary work.

What you do out of love, is neither paid nor counted on the pension. It is not what you do out of a sense of duty, neither because of your good education, nor your lousy empathy. Martin Luther King said: “Fear knocks on the door; the faith opens and no one enters.”

Loving, doing good, borrowing without asking back – are you still afraid to miss out?

### **What’s the MERIT?**

If fear still lingers at the door, if you still feel that it is simply too difficult to love your enemy, then do not feel bad. Because obviously, Jesus figured that out. Because that is what he says to those who ask for a *good life*:

<sup>37</sup> “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. <sup>38</sup> Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Did you listen to this? Maybe you give money and you don’t get it back. Maybe you love, and you are not loved back. Nothing is as hard as man’s ingratitude. But let me tell you: The reward will fall into your lap from a different angle. Like in a Fairytale. Your generosity will pay off. Maybe this sounds like consolation to the hereafter. But you don’t have to go that far. The anonymous woman who anoints Jesus with expensive perfume before the romans take him and crucify him, remains unforgotten. The merciful Samaritan, too. Pastor Christine or someone else in Peace Church who took the time to listen to your sorrows and helped you out. Think of someone who did you good the last time when you really needed it.

It makes me happy to imagine how in the end Christ will say a word of appreciation to both of you – to the generous helpers and to those who appreciated their help.

And I feel that this is a way how hostility loses its power. Community arises and transforms anger, hate and wounds. God's reality becomes alive for us when warm-heartedness and confidence inspire our lives. It's not a dream, but a possibility, that enriches life when we experience the mercifulness of others. A possibility of good life for me, for you and for others.

And wherever you still cannot forgive, you may ask Jesus to forgive in your place. Maybe you never thought about this before, but Jesus couldn't forgive his tormentors on the cross, but he prayed for them: "Father forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing!"

We may bring to Jesus every kind of thoughts we have in our hearts. In his hands, we will experience healing, even if our wounds will stay, maybe even the pain. When Jesus was risen, he was recognized by his wounds. But they weren't wounds of hate or destruction, but of reconciliation and mercifulness.

Brothers and sisters, let's practice to deal with our conflicts and grief in that way, so that we may become a community of the resurrected one. In the Spirit of God. Amen.

We prepared a little activity for you. At the back there are some baskets at the table and in there you will find little stones. You can take one of these as a symbol for your enemies or your wounds. You may lay down the stones at the altar and take back an encouraging word from the living God with you. While we're doing this little exercise, the choir will sing a song.