

Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Erik Christensen

February 24th, 2019

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be with you all this morning and to bring you greetings from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC), your partner in the ministry of the gospel through the preparation of leaders for both church and society. I serve there as Pastor to the Community and Director of Worship, which is how I know Vicar Sarah and previous students who have been placed here for contextual education. Like you, we are proud of who these students are and look forward to witnessing who they will become as they prepare to be sent out into the world. Thank you for the important role you are playing in nurturing a new generation of leadership for the church.

Over the New Year's holiday, my husband and I were out in Denver visiting a close friend from childhood and her family. New Year's Day found us lying on the couch, recovering from a very late night the night before, and watching football — which is not something I generally do, but the commercials were kind of amazing. I was captivated, in particular, by a frequently recurring commercial for an indoor stationary bike with a large flat screen monitor attached that would allow the owner to take part in live spin classes being beamed from the company's studio in New York City. Maybe you've seen the commercials as well. They work. I can say this from first-hand experience because, by the end of the day I was convinced that I needed this bike and less than six weeks later one was delivered to our home.

Sometime last week I decided to squeeze in a quick cardio workout on the bike and saw that there was a 30-minute high-intensity interval training class being offered set

to the music of Diana Ross and the Supremes and I was all in. I clipped my shoes in, cranked up the resistance and pedaled my way through the hits, the cadence of my feet keeping time to songs like, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” “Stop in the Name of Love,” and “I’m Coming Out” (that last one was my favorite). Half an hour later, drenched in sweat, I felt a deep sense of accomplishment as I scanned the screen for a summary of my workout — noting that I’d achieved a personal best in terms of output. Then I noticed a new, unfamiliar badge in the achievement section of my profile. It was a black circle with scalloped edges, like someone had flattened a bottle cap. On the inside was a pattern of green, gold and red lines reminiscent of kente cloth. When I tapped on the icon a text bubble popped up to tell me that I’d earned the 2019 Black History Month achievement. I was a little bit shocked. Then a fragment of scripture came to my mind from the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Micah: “what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and put in half an hour on the bike during Black History Month” (emendation my own).

I’m being cheeky, to be sure, but there was something about that moment that has stuck with me. I’m old enough now to remember when Congress passed the bill calling for the establishment of a national holiday to commemorate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Nearly a hundred congress people voted against the bill, and it took almost another twenty years before all fifty states would observe the holiday.

It’s not the holiday that’s important, of course, but what it stands for. Every year, sometime between mid-January and the end of February, it’s highly likely that we will hear once again the words of Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. At the heart of this dream is an expression of hope for what future generations might one day experience: “I have a dream that my

four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!”

Martin’s dream is filled with what we, at the seminary, might call *eschatological hope*. That is to say, it is a dream filled with the promise of God’s future, a future we long for and believe in, even if the path from here to there is not entirely clear. As we work our way through the gospel of Luke, we have just encountered another such vision of eschatological hope in the form of Jesus’ famous set of blessings and woes known as the Beatitudes. “Blessed are you who are poor ... who are hungry ... who weep ... who are hated and excluded; and woe to you who are rich ... who are full ... who laugh now ... when all speak well of you.” (*Luke 6:20-26*) The speech, which we call a sermon, that Jesus gives, has an edge to it. His dream not only names the future hope for those who suffer, but also names the impediment to that hope by calling out those who benefit from the world as it is, on whom Jesus pronounces woe.

But then, and this is where today’s scripture picks up, Jesus speaks to the people about how they are to treat those who are their enemies — with love. In the context of the list of blessings and woes that have come just before, we understand that the type of enemy Jesus describes isn’t simply the person who vexes the crowd or the neighbor who offends them, but instead the people, the categories of people, who benefit from the very systems that disadvantage them. He is speaking to a great multitude of people who have come from across Judea and Jerusalem, who’ve left their work along the seashores of Tyre and Sidon. He’s talking to the working poor and the ethnically oppressed. He’s talking to people living under military occupation. He’s talking to people with their backs to the wall about how to respond to those who have put them there. It is with those people, those who have already lost the most, that Jesus shares the roadmap for how to get to God’s preferred future, the place and time

in which ancient enmities are reconciled and children are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin.

It hardly seems fair. It's like this story from the end of the book of Genesis in which Joseph, sold into slavery by his very own brothers, becomes the means of salvation for his family during a time of famine by giving them shelter in Egypt. He, who would have had every right to deny his family as they had denied him, instead becomes for them the means of grace, sharing with them from an abundance they had no part in creating. It's not fair.

Jesus acknowledges this, that what he is asking is not fair. God's realm will not enter the world on the wings of reciprocity, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" he asks. "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same? If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But 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; [who] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as [God, the loving parent] is merciful." (32-36)

Here is heart of this passage: "be merciful, just as God is merciful," says Jesus. We, who are so quick to keep track of all the ways we have been wronged, are known and loved by a God who refuses to deal with us on the basis of all that we ourselves have done wrong. It is not fair. Justice demands judgment, and Jesus says, "do not judge." Morality demands condemnation, and Jesus says, "do not condemn." Instead he says, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

I'll admit, there is something odd about this development in the logic of Jesus' argument. He's just gotten done saying to his followers, "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?" and so on. Then he turns around and says, "Forgive and

you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.” It sounds like we’re right back in that place of reciprocity. But then he follows it up with an image that doesn’t immediately make sense to us anymore. Jesus says, “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

It’s not immediately clear to us in this day and age, but Jesus is using a metaphor from the marketplace. In order to understand it, we have to imagine that the way a household would buy grain would be to go to the marketplace and pay or trade for a measure of wheat. Rather than a marketplace in which the seller tries to give you the least product for the most pay, Jesus describes a scene in which the seller presses down on the measure, packs as much in as possible, shakes the container to make sure the wheat has settled into every last crevice and then, when the wheat begins to run over the rim of the vessel, allows the buyer to gather up the overflow in their apron and take it home as well. Measure out your forgiveness, measure out your generosity, like this. That is how we will arrive in God’s promised future, by living and acting as though the forgiveness, the mercy, the abundance, the grace we long for is already ours to give away. Because it is. It is ours to give away.

Honestly, the 30-minute bike ride is easier. A measurable amount of effort over a set period of time to produce a consistent result. That’s the appeal of it. Hard work, rewarded with desired outcomes and, from time to time, a badge to tell me that I’m making a difference.

Jesus calls us to something more challenging, to a world-transforming work that begins in the intimate quarters of our own lives, the story of our own relationship with God. Do you long for that world of blessing where the poor are enfranchised, the hungry are fed, the mourners are consoled, and those who have for too long suffered this world’s hate are finally embraced in love? Then begin with yourself. Take an hon-

est accounting of the ways that God has met your rigid, merit-based approach to life with extravagant love. Tell the truth about the ways God has responded to your persistent failings with unfailing grace. Let the hard callouses of your heart be softened by God's promises of a future filled with hope. Set your sights on a world that is more than fair, a world that is generous and forgiving. Begin again. Be born again. Live into the future as though you are the child at the center of the dream, because you are. We all are.