

Sermon *The One Who Gives Us Life Teaches How to Live*  
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 2.23.25

The message for today is this: the one who gives you life is also the one who teaches you how to live. We believe that God gave us life and we trust and rely on God to show us how to live. With that in mind, Jesus said this: *Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you.*

What Jesus said sounds outlandish. Maybe irrelevant and mostly impossible. Yet, in faith, let's listen to what Jesus is saying (because the One who created us also shows us how to live).

As an example, if you take a bag – shopping bag, or a heavy purse, or a toolbox – hold it out in front of you with your arm parallel with the ground, you will not be able to hold it like that for very long. The longer you hold the bag out in front of you the more resources your body will send to your shoulder and arm to keep it there. It will affect your breathing, your posture, and it will cause your brain to narrow in its thinking. At some point in the very near future, your body will only be able to function and think about trying to keep that bag out in front of your body.

Taking the same bag, if you were to hold it comfortably at your side, your body then can go about doing other things. If you had a shoulder strap for that bag, you could hold it for even longer and use your hands for other things. Changing the way you hold a bag will affect the way you think (and breathe and walk). I am telling you this because our bodies were designed to carry bags but only in certain ways.

The One who created us also tells us that our bodies were not designed to carry hate, anger, resentment, malice and bitterness. Like holding a bag out in front of our body, we can hold anger and resentment for a while; but it will take more and more resources from the body to maintain it and eventually it will consume all we think about. Jesus is telling us to put the bag down. He is saying that with these words: *bless those who curse you, pray for those who harm you.* I'll get into that in just a moment; but first, let's talk more about what we were created to do.

Humans are designed and created to love. We are really good at love. Jesus said: *Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your strength and all of your mind.* And, (say it with me) *love your neighbor as yourself.* Why would Jesus command us to do all that loving if we were not created to do it. Love, for us humans, is not like slicing up a pie – God gets a slice, our spouse gets a slice, children/grandchildren get another slice, and college football gets a slice. No, that's not how it works. The more you love, the more you receive, the more you can love – it's how we were created. We can love freely, unabashedly, and love God, ourselves, our friends and family, all without giving out any particular slice of a pie. And, as Jesus points out, the more love you give the more love you receive until it's overflowing like a shaken drink that runs over and pours into your lap!

We are so good at love that study after study shows we even love inanimate objects – things that are incapable of loving us back. We love our cell phones, our cars, houses, plants, trees, sunsets, dolphins. We do; because we are created to love.

We are created to lift up others. We are created to encourage and support and help others. When we make other people feel good, we feel good too. It's how we are designed. In fact, if you are lacking happiness in your life, study after study shows that all you have to do is make someone else happy and you will feel more happiness. Volunteer at a food bank, an animal shelter; call someone who you are thinking of and just tell them that you are thinking of them. Even if you leave a voicemail, you will feel your happiness increasing. We are created this way.

Scripture tells us not to gossip. Why? The One who created us will also show us how to live. Gossip hurts. It takes away your happiness. Sure, it might feel good to dish out on one of your neighbors for the moment, but later, you will feel worse than you did before. Gossip pales in comparison to hate, malice and bitterness. If you hate someone – whether they deserve it or not – it will hurt you. Malice, resentment and all the others increase our blood pressure, change the way our heart beats and eventually will change the way we think. It rots us from the inside out. We were not created to do it so we have to get rid of it.

Jesus gives us the answer: *love your enemies*. When he says “love” he doesn't mean to give them a valentines day gift; or to send flowers, or anything like that. Here is what he said: Love your enemies: *do good* to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, *pray* for those who abuse you. (I put the verbs in italics for emphasis) I believe that Jesus is outlining for us how to love one's enemies – *do good, bless and pray*. Let's start with prayer (if we start there, we will see that we will bless our enemies and do good).

I used to remember the name of the CEO and COO (operating officer) of the insurance company I worked for. In particular, I had the opportunity to interact a bit with the COO so for me to forget his name, and the CEO, that's something interesting. Adding on to my forgetfulness – I don't really remember what they look like either. Maybe with a police lineup I could, but right now I don't. The how and why this is important is because they made a financial decision to close most of the satellite offices that did regional underwriting and consolidated them into the Atlanta and Seattle corporate offices. I worked nights and weekends on a confidential report that showed our satellite was well worth the investment; but, it didn't matter, we got laid off anyway – the entire building. Four weeks later after the layoff, I was sitting in my priest's office – Brian Prior – because I was being consumed with malice and resentment toward those two people. It was costing me sleep and happiness and joy. I couldn't focus on finding a job because I was consumed with anger.

He said there is a way through it. He said to imagine what gives me the most joy and peace – it was simple, my wife Christi and our family. Brian told me to imagine the peace and joy I receive and ask, in prayer, for God to bless those two men in the same way God has blessed me. Stunned, I said this: what is option B? He smiled and slowly said, “There is no option B.” He then said, “Pray for them before you pray for your family. Pray for them first. And, you don't have to be sincere, you don't have to mean it; you just have to do it, once a day for the next 30 days.”

It took five.

I started noticing a change in me right away. It was like I was finally able to place a heavy weight that I had been holding in front of me down to my side. A couple of days later, I put it over my shoulder. A day later, the weight was gone. And now, I don't remember their names.

To pray for those who have harmed us – to pray that God bless them with the same grace and goodness that we have received – and to not even be sincere about it, that is how we “love our enemies”; it's how we do good and it's in prayer. One of the many things I learned from this is that we are designed to do it. We are designed for prayer and forgiveness. It makes us feel better (even when we don't mean it). Within a week, I actually hoped that God was blessing those men. Turns out, I did mean it after all.

The first converts to the faith that became known as Christianity were jail guards, captors and those who wanted to harm the believers. The guard at the feet of Jesus when he was hanging on the cross was the first to say, “This man truly was God's son.” Jesus, with his last breath, looked down upon the guards and said, “They don't know what they are doing, forgive them.” It was his last breath – to pray for those who had harmed him. He is asking us to follow his example.

As I reflect on the day that I was laid off – we had adopted our two girls from Russia and Ethan had just been born – I now know I was set free. I give thanks for it. You see, the Episcopal Church has a 30-year pension. I loved my job. I wasn't going to leave it – I had to be forced out. It caused me to dive into discernment for the priesthood. A year later I entered seminary. I graduated and was ordained shortly after turning 37. This means I get the opportunity to retire when I am 67. If I had waited another ten years – had I not been forced out – well, you can do the math. I now give thanks for what was one of the most stressful times of my life.

Let us pray:

*Lord, I lift to you the names of the people who have harmed me. You have blessed me richly with love. In the same way, I ask that you bless those persons. Fill them with the same joy and peace that I have. Bring them your forgiveness and love in the same way that you have forgiven me and love me.*

*This I pray in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who taught me to love and to forgive. Amen.*