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Luke 6:27-38
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²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bleed those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Paradise. That's what it was in the beginning. That's where we were in the beginning. Or that's what many legends tell us. In the Hebrew Scriptures it's called the Garden of Eden. In the stories about paradise, it is seen as a garden with flowers and trees bearing fruit, fruit that never goes bad, animals that are peaceful and the friends of humans, rivers of calm cool water, weather that is never too hot or too cold. Some religions view this as a place where we came from in the time of our innocence, others view it as a place we go to after we die, and some see it as both. No one knows where it is, or was, of course. In the ancient world it was viewed as someplace far to the north, or to the east, or someplace far across the sea. So compelling was this image of Paradise that in his diary of 1498, Christopher Columbus was convinced that the new land he had sailed to was an earthly paradise, the fringes of the long-lost garden of Eden. It wasn't of course, and we've explored this world enough to know that there is no longer such a place here on earth. Was there ever? Who knows? Will there be one someday? Again, who knows? Somewhere within us are perhaps the intimations of paradise. Sitting on a beach in Hawaii last month, watching the waves roll in as the sun goes down, with your beloved by my side,

and I admit I thought to myself, “heaven must be like this.” As a well-loved dog looks into your eyes and you can almost tell what she's thinking but you also get the sense that she knows what you're thinking, and the thought comes, “Eden must have been like this.” When all the house is quiet, everyone is in their places and you are lying warm in your bed next to the person you love most in the world. When you sit down at a holiday table and are surrounded by family and friends and there is not an empty seat nor an empty spot on the table and you think, “this is what it's supposed to be like.” Maybe somewhere in there is a memory of a time in Paradise, or perhaps it's a hope for Paradise still to come that's not here yet.

Well, what happened? Why aren't we there? Well according to the ancient traditions, we've been banned from Paradise because we sinned. In the way the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story, we were tempted to do something forbidden even though God said not to, but we did it anyway, because we wanted to be like God. Those are the words of the serpent that come to us in Genesis, tempting us to eat of the fruit, “for God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.” To be like God. That's the original sin, the sin that got us tossed out of Paradise, the sin that we keep committing—we keep deciding that we know better than God, our pride sets us up on the throne of our hearts. We are going to live our way, my way, I'm going to be the master of my own fate, I'm going to be like God.

The original sin. To be like God. Well, if that's true, what is this passage about? Luke tells us to “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Wait a minute. We're *supposed* to be like God? Merciful because God is that way? Wasn't the original sin trying to be like God? How can this passages tell us to try to be like God? In the Sermon on the Plain Jesus is telling us how to do good, to turn the other cheek, provide for the poor and the refugee, don't hate, don't take vengeance, take care of those with less. And why should we do these things? Because we're trying to be like God. How does this make sense?

The original sin is when we try to be like God. We try to take God's place. We try to be like God,

instead of God. But the original virtue, if you will, is when we try to be like God because of God. It is the imitation of God, the imitation of Christ, not his replacement. It is recognizing the image of God within each person, within ourselves and growing into that image. Let me be clear that this is a result of God's grace not a precursor of grace. The words of Jesus are given to the disciples, those who already follow him. It's not "act this way and you can be saved," it's "act this way because you are saved." But can we do this? Can we really be forgiving of those who hurt us?

When Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Plain, he is showing us what can be, what should be, but also what is not yet. This is what we are working toward. This is what it will look like when we become more and more like Christ. St. Paul talks about this as growing up into the fullness of Christ. In the late Middle Ages Thomas a Kempis called this "the imitation of Christ." St. Augustine believed that the imitation of Christ as the fundamental purpose of the Christian life and as a remedy for the sin of Adam. We are to become like God—because of God, not instead of God.

So what does this mean for us? What do we do in order to become more like Christ? The things that Jesus asks us to do seem a little crazy—turn the other cheek, give away the shirt off your back, do good to those who hate you. Perhaps the key is when he commands us to love and pray for our enemies. We already know that we are to love our neighbors. This makes the circle even greater. Everyone we come in contact with should be seen as someone who is there for us to love, to pray for, to work for the best. That means being concerned about the welfare of the people around us, but even those that we don't like, even those who don't like us. Maybe especially those who don't like us. What's the loving thing to do? Isn't that the question we should ask? What's the loving thing to do for that brother whom we don't get along with? What about the homeless guy on the street? What about the one whose politics make us see red? What about the foreigner? How do we as the Church of Jesus Christ act lovingly toward them? How do we love like Jesus does, even if, like Jesus, loving might be at the risk of our lives? In a way, this passage is both a description and a prescription. This isn't just a picture of the Garden of Eden again, how beautiful the flowers and trees are, how friendly the animals are. But it's a

description of how we will act toward one another in Paradise. We will be forgiving and loving toward one another. We will share what we have, and receive in return. And it is also a prescription—this tells us how to get back to Paradise. It is not a map of where to go to find it, but it tells us how to make it. Give to those in need. Love everyone no matter what. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. And forgive. All this month we have been talking about forgiveness, that God is always ready to forgive us, that we are all in need of being forgiven, and today that we can forgive each other, because we have been forgiven. This is how we create the world that we long for deep in our souls, that we remember somewhere in the recesses of our DNA, this is how we get back to Paradise—we forgive. Because we know that we have been forgiven. That's what gives us the ability to forgive, because God has forgiven us and this is how we be like God. We act like Jesus. And we forgive, even when they don't ask, even when they don't deserve it. Because that's how God forgives each one of us. To love as God loves. To be like God. To be forgiving because we are forgiven.