



Diaconal Sunday SERMON

February 23, 2025 – Luke 6:27-38

By Faith Nostbakken

Greetings, siblings in Christ. My name is Faith Nostbakken and I am an ordained deacon in the ELCIC, living in Edmonton, Alberta, where I serve in a number of ways, including as a spiritual director and an ecumenical representative for our synod. This Sunday is designated as Diaconal Sunday in the ELCIC. We hope it is an opportunity not only to raise awareness of the specific public call to Word and Service of Deacons—those of us already ordained in this role—but for those who might feel nudged in this direction and for all of us as people of God, called to *diakonia*, meaning “service,” in God’s name, with God’s blessing.

The text for today from Luke’s gospel is a profound and challenging call to service particularly in the way it calls us all to love, not as an emotion, but as an action that knows no boundaries or limits. Jesus indicates that there are no boundaries distinguishing enemies from friends and seemingly no boundaries that would protect us or our possessions from the needs of another. Indeed, Jesus describes responses such as giving to someone who asks for your cloak your shirt as well, or lending to someone expecting nothing in return. Understand that these were radical words even in Jesus’ time; they are certainly radical words today. Why, the economy itself would collapse if there were no repayment of loans, including a fair compensation of interest for the privilege of borrowing. At a much more personal level, we live so much in a world of reciprocity. If you give a gift to me, in some fashion I suddenly feel the need to look for the right opportunity to give a gift of similar value back to you. This balance of giving and receiving creates a harmony of good relationships that is responsive, generating good will, good feelings, and good communities. Similarly, however, if you harm me or one of my loved ones, I may develop a strong compulsion, especially if it is a recurrent behavior, to react not from my best impulses, but from a place of pay-back—retribution. Perhaps you’ve seen the bumper sticker, “Don’t get mad. Get even.” Again, from an understanding of justice, we instinctively sense the need for balance. Our justice system itself is based partly on that way of thinking: imprisoning someone is not simply designed to make our communities safer but to make the offender pay for harms committed. At a much more vengeful level, wars are fought to destroy others—the ‘enemies’—for some real or perceived transgression committed against us or simply carried forward from generations past, with the initial reason or justification for the hatred or grudge long forgotten.

In today's text, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and a large crowd, offering the middle section of what is known as his Sermon on the Plain, his teachings which invite a way of living with one another that is not based on revenge for wrongs felt. It is not even based on the more common harmonious balance of reciprocity—the giving and receiving back and forth that fosters what seem to be healthy, loving relationships. Rather, Jesus is offering a different kind of economy, a divine economy of grace, where giving expects nothing in return and where loving is not even necessarily the equivalent of liking someone but rather of responding to them in ways we might want to be treated ourselves. “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” Jesus says. This is sometimes called the Golden Rule. It is a different kind of measurement than plotting how to get even or mulling over how to balance out sharing so that it feels as if nothing is owing in either direction.

God's economy is so much more generous than that, and so much less calculating because God's economy is founded on both love and mercy—both of which issue from a source of abundance. Love is a renewable resource; the more it is offered, the more it abounds. I will likely never forget—because I haven't yet—the Sunday School song I learned in my childhood about giving. The refrain and verse go like this: “Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away; you'll end up having more. It's just like a magic penny; hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, you'll have so many, they'll roll all over the floor.” In my child's mind, I always visualized those pennies, rolling all over the place—in an era when pennies, those copper coins, still existed and when they had some value (though perhaps not lavish). Unlike pennies, however, God's love for us is lavish. It is as lavish as the intersecting beams of a wooden cross when Jesus eventually pours himself out entirely to draw us into God's embrace. In today's text, he simply describes God as kind—not only or merely to the warm-hearted and well-behaved—but to the ungrateful and the wicked, too. Kindness is one expression of generous abundance. It is a word that evokes softness, gentleness, and warmth, but also fierce, protective commitment. It might be the most natural response, for example, to a young child struggling to reach for something or looking lost and afraid in a crowd.

However, it may not be the most obvious response to those Jesus names as ungrateful and wicked—those who deliberately set out to harm, demean, or take advantage of others, including, perhaps ourselves. What can possibly soften our hearts and support us in our woundedness so that kindness issues from us indiscriminately, too? Perhaps the only way to answer that is to acknowledge our own connection to the divine economy of grace, our relationship to the one who is not only kind but merciful, too. For Jesus says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” We have this deep and abiding relationship with our eternal parent, who seals us in our baptism with an unbreakable bond such that the core of our identity is rooted in this love which has no limits, no boundaries, no criteria of merit, and no element of

scarcity at all. We are constantly and continually being invited to this deep well that never runs dry; we are constantly being invited to share love, risk kindness, offer mercy, and forget about any kind of balance sheet that keeps track of who owes whom what or how big an apology needs to be in order to merit a remnant of forgiveness from us.

Not for a moment am I pretending that Jesus' words to us today are an easy path of least resistance. His words about how to treat others are a continual reminder that our capacity for kindness, love, and mercy is so easily overturned by other messages that come to us from within or without—messages about retribution (getting even) or reciprocity (staying balanced and equal in our giving and sharing). The final words in today's gospel text, however, can be heard as the promise emerging out of God's divine economy: "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." The image describes oil or wheat poured into a measuring vessel, pressed down, shaken together and running over—to fill the vessel completely and then to watch it overflow! Indeed, what is the point of the measuring vessel at all, if the goodness poured into it is simply going to flow over its edges onto our laps, possibly out of our laps onto the floor, and, like that magic penny in the song I mentioned, multiply and roll all over place. That's the gospel vision we are invited not only to recognize but to realize by our own actions, ignited by the abundance of God's goodness for which measuring sticks, measuring vessels, or balance sheets are completely irrelevant.

On this Diaconal Sunday when we acknowledge diakonia, the service we are called to offer to those near and far, friend, stranger, or foe, let us remind ourselves of our identity as children of a generous, compassionate, merciful God. May that loving parent renew our strength and softness of heart from such deep belonging in love that we dare to risk giving ourselves away. We dare do so knowing that the source of our courage and kindness, sacrifice and forgiveness springs from an abundant divine economy from which the supply of goodness is constantly overflowing. May that vision and promise become more real for us as we offer its goodness to those we encounter today, tomorrow, and spilling out in the days ahead. *Amen.*