

How Love Begins
Luke 6:27-38

Prayer

My grandfather Popi loved to root for the villain in a story.

As a child of the 1980s (which, in my head, is still 20 years ago), I grew up in the age of He Man and She Ra, in the age of Strawberry Shortcake and Care Bears. When we read a Strawberry Shortcake book together, Popi would cheer for Purple Pieman, the character who had it in for Stawberry Shortcake and her sweet ways.

When we played with dolls, Popi would always be the “bad guy,” showing up and saying “ooga booga.”

And when we to a live action He Man/She Ra show at the Roanoke Civic Center, Skeltor, He Man’s enemy, came on to the stage, and the crowd booed.... Except for my grandfather, who cheered.

Enemies were so clear in these children’s stories. There were the “good” characters and the “bad.” It was clear who we should root for, who we should oppose.

In the time when Luke’s Gospel was written several decades after Jesus’s death, the enemies would have been the occupying Roman empire, and those who worked to support it. They would have been the soldiers and local leaders fed by Roman rulers who took coats, taxed heavily, satisfied whims, held grudges, and let their bad days out on the people they passed.... Daily life under occupation for those Jesus addressed here was precarious.... And to these people, Jesus says, “Here’s how you can live in the face of all of this.”

He tells them to “love” their enemies. The word used for love here is agape, which can be understood as “to consider another’s highest good.”

To consider another’s highest good.

How do we consider the highest good for those who oppose vaccines? Or for those whose worldview led them to storm the US Capitol on Jan 6th with zip ties and bear spray? The highest good for Russian troops shelling Ukraine?

But maybe in asking the question this way, we are starting in the wrong place, and we make it so big that we wouldn't ever be able to reach it.

And when something feels so big, it's easy to turn away entirely, to not even start.

This feels like so big of an ask that I might want to shrug, say that God will have to stand in the gaps, and walk back.

But I don't think we can leave like that.

How should love begin?

Carson McCullers tells a story about the beginning of love.

A man comes to a café and talks to a boy. The man tells the boy, regretfully, how his marriage ended. Being with his wife, he said, had felt an "assembly line for his soul." And now she was gone, had been gone for more than ten years.

For five years, this man said, he pursued his wife who left.... And then, he whispered to the boy, he found peace.

Most people start at the wrong end of love, he says.... The peak.

Most people start at the end of love that is the high, the idea that another will complete all things in you...

But do you how long should begin? The man asked.

A tree. A Rock. A Cloud.

The man described how he got a goldfish and learned to love it, not for what it could give him but as it was.

He practiced loving a fish, and then the person he passed on the street.

He practiced, and let his love expand from each piece to something larger.

What McCullers is suggesting here is that we cannot really love someone until we know the world they are part of.... What it feels like to walk down the road where they live in late summer, and find where the wild blackberries grow. Or what it feels like to live in a place not safe enough to open the windows at night for fresh air in spring.

What it means to grow up in a place where, two generations ago, there were good factory jobs that no longer exist now.

What it feels like to leave your country, your language, your mosque, your family, and to begin again in a new country with only the clothes you were wearing when you evacuated.

What it means to lose a child to addiction.

What it means to be so lonely and so hungry for community and meaning that you find it online on a message board, among people who are good at reaching the lonely and the searching.

What it means to begin with trees, rocks, and clouds.

To look for a connection point, find a place of understanding, of empathy, of listening.

Look behind the person to the place they inhabit.

Find a way in.

Find something in their background to practice reaching toward.

I need to make an important note about this passage. This passage, like so many others from Scripture, has been used to support abuse and oppression. It has been used to counsel people to remain in violent relationships, and to enslaved people to keep them obedient to masters.

But actually, these verses point to not accepting abuse, but to non-violent resistance.

Theologian Walter Wink describes them this way:

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." Why the right cheek? A blow by the right fist in that right-handed world would land on the left cheek of the opponent. An open-handed slap would also strike the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand, but in that society the left hand was used only for unclean tasks. The only way one could naturally strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the hand. A backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. Why then does Jesus counsel these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek?

Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you." In that world of honor and shaming, he has been rendered powerless to shame a subordinate. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything humiliating."

What I hear Jesus saying in this passage is—use what you have to create another way.

Use what you have to create another way.
Plant trees where there need to be trees.
Remove rocks where they need to be removed.

The entrance to the Tent of Nations farm outside Bethlehem has a stone that says, “We refuse to be enemies.” The Nassar family has owned their farm back to the Ottoman Empire, and they have remained there despite being surrounded by occupying settlements.

They are a testimony to nonviolent resistance, seeking to build bridges between people, and between people and the land. They bring cultures together to develop understanding and promote respect for each other and our shared environment.

Tent of Nations runs children’s summer camps, women’s empowerment projects, environmental efforts, workcamps.

When they weren’t allowed building permits by Israel’s government, they instead outfitted caves as meeting rooms and made a chapel. They set up wi fi inside a cave.

In 2019, Diana Maxwell and Alanna and Dan Betts spent time at the Tent of Nations. One of the projects they worked on was literally moving rocks—clearing rocks from one place to another. And Dan said that they were told to “make flat.” Removing rock by rock, to make flat. To allow something new to come in.

How should love begin?
With a tree, a rock, a cloud.

Maybe our real enemy is what tells us that the world is condemned, that we cannot save it or each other.

Maybe our real enemy when we read the news and feel we can’t offer enough, so we walk away entirely.

Maybe our real enemy is that what tells us the divisions are too deep and that we don’t live under the same sky.

And maybe we subvert that enemy of helplessness one tree, rock, and cloud at a time.

If we want to save democracy, we can start with working on voting rights locally. If we want to address climate change, we can put solar on our roof, and support groups like the Solar Village Project, and we can ask our banks to divest from fossil fuels.

If we want the health care system in the US reimagined, we can join in efforts like the UCC's payment of medical debt. In two years, the denomination has paid off \$100 million of medical debt. The UCC worked with RIP Medical Debt to buy the debt at pennies on the dollar, multiplying the impact.

If we want to help in a crisis, we can donate blood at Rock Spring and respond to the country's serious blood donation shortage.

If we want to create another way for the people of Afghanistan, we can support the church's Welcoming the Stranger project. The church has formed three care teams to support refugee families in their resettlement here. This weekend, members of the church will take a family we are working with—a family evacuated from Afghanistan in August—and will buy them beds and food, and will come alongside them and listen.

How does love begin?

A tree, a rock, a cloud.

Coloring books for a 3 year old refugee child, solar power on a school in India, one person who shows up to vote who otherwise wouldn't.

And when we start to take these steps, to look for these trees, rocks, and clouds, we realize that we move toward agape love.

Toward considering another's highest good.

And that we get to move toward it every day.

Today's Scripture passage closes with the beautiful verse envisioning the future. I invite you to close your eyes as you hear these words, so you can picture this....

"A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap." Can you see this?

The author Pam Houston had sworn off romantic relationships, before surprising herself by getting married at age 56 to Mike, a lifelong forest ranger, age 61. Pam reflects on climate change and this moment in time, writing, "One thing I do know

is that as our suffering gets greater, so must our love. Not just me and Mike, not just one for another, but all of us, for all of us, and for Earth in distress. What is left for us is to walk into the devastation awake and full of compassion. We are going to have to love fiercely, and fervently, all the way to the end, with nothing to protect us but our empathy, our sensitivity, our mercy, and our courage. Love....must not be a diminished love, but one of endless expansion.”

Love must not be a diminished love, but one of endless expansion.

Start with a tree, a rock, a cloud.

Let it begin there,

And keep going.

And keep going.

Amen

Benediction:

How should love begin?

A tree, a rock, a cloud.

Beginning, and not ending there.

Amen

Announcements:

Good morning!

How will things look different in here next week?

People back!

Look for link to register tomorrow.

Sunday school resumes 3/6.

Bloodmobile 3/6—crisis in blood supply in US—will be in-person then

Book discussion Tuesday night Transcendent Kingdom

Text prayer requests to Ashley

The flowers today are given by Lisa Transgrud in celebration of American presidents and leaders around the world who have worked for peace and justice.