

## Not Them

The passage which I read from Luke today contains many verses which are also found in Matthew and Mark, but not grouped together in this same manner. Luke gathers these words of Jesus and presents them in a different order and a different context than is found in the other gospel narratives. Some of these differences were likely due to the passage of time since Jesus' death and resurrection; some were due to the differences in the audience to whom the writer of this gospel was bringing the good news which Jesus had proclaimed. As I studied the familiar passage this week a couple of things occurred to me—first, even more time has passed since Jesus spoke these words. Secondly the people who hear them today are certainly a different audience---or are we? What is the effect on us of hearing these words if we are the audience to whom Jesus is speaking? The text for today begins, "But I say to you that listen," according to the NRSV which I read. Or in the NIV translation of the pew Bible you read: "But I tell you who hear me:" A third option which is a more literal translation of the verbal tenses of the Greek is, "But I say to you who are hearing," In each case, the you being addressed is plural, but there is a conditional sense in the phrase inserted before Jesus gets to the point he is going to make. The point that I am making is that Jesus seems to expect that not all those in his audience—those who are there and able to physically hear-- are going to be paying attention. As we all realize, physical hearing and listening do not always mean that what is being said penetrates; that it is really heard is the sense that it enters into the consciousness so that meaning is attached and comprehension follows. It seems that Jesus has words which he is directing toward those who are paying attention to him—those who are wanting to be his followers—to those who are his disciples, but not all those present are going to really hear and take seriously these words. "You that listen." "You who hear me." "You who are hearing" So let us place ourselves in that crowd on the plain, listening to Jesus—hearing what he is saying. If we are the ones hearing him, how do we determine and follow the meaning for those instructions in our lives? "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Wait a minute. That can't be the right instructions for our lives. Jesus couldn't really be asking that of us, could he? Despite the familiarity of these verses, in many ways, isn't that still our reaction to these instructions? Isn't that the way we dismiss Jesus' words by assuming that Jesus is setting up an impossible set of instructions, rules or commands for us to follow? Isn't that something that it just isn't humanly possible for us to do? There is a strain of theological thought which seems to favor this as an interpretation of these verses. This interpretation is that by assuming that Jesus is setting up an impossible command, forcing us to admit our need, our sin, our brokenness, this realization thus drives us to the good news of Jesus' promise of forgiveness and grace. If it is impossible, then we can dismiss it as something we should be striving to do. That then lets us off the hook so to speak. There is another common option about how to handle these instructions which skirts the theological implications of Jesus' life for those with a less theological tendency. It declares these were the naïve instructions of a philosophical dreamer, someone whose head was always in the clouds who clearly didn't understand how the world really works. I list that as the option that the cynic would support. Again, this allows the instructions to be dismissed

as an impossible achievement. There is a third option—a third way of dismissing this passage. This option is to assume that we actually manage to follow it pretty well. Of course, if you really think about what Jesus is calling for us to do, thinking that you are doing well—that takes a fair amount of self-delusion. I think this way of dismissing the passage also tends to result in the taking on the responsibility, the burden, and I suspect the secret pleasure of judgment, of making sure others are following these instructions. This approach seems to involve not only self-delusion but self-righteousness. I have listed three ways which it seems to me that these words of Jesus have been commonly heard by those who of us in the audience. These opening verses were phrased in generalizations about relationships—loving enemies, doing good to those who hate, blessing those who curse, praying for those who abuse. Then Jesus describes specific interactions. As Jesus phrased these instructions, he continued: “if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” Here Jesus lists specific acts between individuals—anyone who strikes you on the cheek, takes away your coat, takes away your goods—these acts seem to be examples of the first generalizations. The responses can be seen as doing good, blessing, giving a positive response to the negative action. There have been times when these verses have been used in a manipulative fashion to render the already vulnerable and victimized to be further abused. This is not what Jesus is doing with these instructions. When Jesus calls for the response to be to turn the other cheek, it is a call to squelch the response of anger of being hit not to issue an invitation to another blow. It is creating a different scenario for when an enemy attacks—meet that attack with a different response—not with revenge or hatred but with an acceptance which has the potential to defuse the attack. When someone says something hurtful, don’t respond in kind—be silent or offer a complement. Notice what follows these specific instructions is another generalizations which we have come to call the golden rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you. In other words, the specific actions Jesus lists are to replace the harmful way of being treated with treating in a beneficial way. Our text goes on to expand the scope of these behaviors. Verse 32: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them? 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.” As we move further into this passage it seems that like much of the narrative which Luke presents to us, what we have is a descriptions of a radically different world—a world which represents the reign of God which Jesus is proclaiming is near and Jesus is describing what that world looks like to those who are listening. What if we go back to the scene on the plain and instead of dismissing Jesus’ words in any of those three ways as instructions, rules or commands which are not possible but instead view them as a promise that essentially life does not have to be this way—the way of this broken world. That there is indeed another option. That we can treat others as we want to be treated. That there is enough, more than enough—love, attention, food, worth, honor, time, to go around. That no matter how hard you play be the rules of the world you are still trapped in the death and loss that is part and parcel of this world, but that this world isn’t the only one. In fact, maybe this one is not even

the most real one. And that is the thing that is found in this passage. Jesus is not offering a set of simple rules by which to get by or get ahead in this world but is inviting us into a whole other world. A world that is not about measuring and counting and weighing and competing and judging and paying back and hating and all the rest. Instead the world which Jesus invites us to live in is about love. Love for those who have loved you. Love for those who haven't. Love even for those who have hated you. That love gets expressed in all kinds of creative ways, but often comes through by caring—extending care and compassion and help and comfort to those in need—and forgiveness—not paying back but releasing anger and fear, replacing distrust of others with trust. The passage ends: Do not judge, and you will not be judge; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. It is an interesting exercise for someone who was trained as a scientist to hear atheist speak about religious faith, because for some of them, their atheism is a faith—but that is another debate. But some of the better known atheists argue that the world is based on cause and effect. In other words, it is a closed system so that there is no room for miracles, let alone a Divine Being in the physical universe, let alone resurrection and a God who lived and moved and continues to create—Such a God would bring down the whole orderly universe. And yet, I would contend that much in this world has never made sense and with the Apostle Paul claim that now I only see dimly but will know fully later as I am known fully now. And one of the things which makes the least sense in all of the world is love. Love itself, when you think about it, makes no sense in this kind of mechanistic view of the universe. For love, defined simply, is seeking the good of another above your own. Love is not a means to an end, it is an end unto itself, which in turn, creates morality and justice and all the rest of the things we strive for yet fail to find or manifest absent love. As we imagine ourselves with Jesus among us telling us to listen---to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us—to bless those who curse us—to pray for those who abuse us—we are being invited by Jesus to view those around us—the world around us inclusively. We are being invited to a world where we can no longer say: not them, they are not invited. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.