



**Opening Prayer:** Most wonderful God, please encourage each one of us down to the very depths of our soul. For I am poor, and meek, and hungry, my soul is often sorrowful, and sometimes persecuted; my soul yearns for communion with you. Set me free to reach for you with a joyful worship, a joy which overflows with wonder and love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Hymn StF 606 (Michael Perry)**

**Tune: Thaxted**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A6QCM2IHdM>

O God beyond all praising,  
We worship You today,  
And sing the love amazing  
That songs cannot repay;  
For we can only wonder  
At every gift you send,  
At blessings without number  
And mercies without end:  
We lift our hearts before You  
And wait upon Your word,  
We honour and adore You,  
Our great and mighty Lord.

Then hear, O gracious Saviour,  
Accept the love we bring,  
That we who know Your favour  
May serve You as our King;  
And whether our tomorrows  
Be filled with good or ill,  
We'll triumph through our sorrows  
And rise to bless You still:  
To marvel at Your beauty  
And glory in Your ways,  
And make a joyful duty  
Our sacrifice of praise

**Scripture: Luke 6:27-38**

### **Sermon**

On Friday morning – a couple of days ago – I was a participant in the latest Safeguarding Course provided by The Methodist Church. As preachers we are required to do such a course every five years. One of the themes which kept coming up as the course progressed was the issue of forgiveness. The main focus of this course was about identifying and dealing appropriately with those who commit or are likely to commit abuse... abuse against children and other vulnerable people.

Abuse is hardly ever spontaneous. It is planned carefully, executed secretly, and committed with sinister intent. No wonder, then, as Christians we are constantly confronted with an absurdity: what place forgiveness in the face of the unforgivable? At the heart of our gospel reading today is another absurd proposal: "Love your enemies." On the face of it this is another absurd thing to say. Enemies are, practically by definition, people whom you cannot love.

Before we go any further, let me tell you a very short story. A mother wanted her twin children baptised. In the baptism preparations it came to light that she had not been baptised herself. She was gently asked why she wanted something for her daughters she was not going to receive for herself. The mother said, "I think I might make this step one day, but not today." Three years later the mother was back asking for her third child to be baptised. The mother was also wanting to be baptised herself. When she was asked what was different now from three years previously there was a long pause. She said: "There was someone I could not forgive." "So, what has changed, now?" she was asked. "He's died now," said the mother, with clear relief.

I think the story of this mother takes us to the heart of Jesus' words in today's gospel. What the story shows us is the difference between what it means to love and what it means to forgive. The word forgiveness has itself often been abused and misused. Take 3 or 4 seconds to focus on your feelings about the prospect of each of the following: forgiving the person who raped your child, or murdered your mother, or repeatedly abused one of the kids in Sunday School. Even if we have the grace to listen to a victim's story – a process that may take years – forgiveness is NOT something one can tell somebody else to do.

So, what is forgiveness then? Forgiveness comes when the victim finally faces up to being utterly fed up with being in their prison of hatred and anger and powerlessness. They reach out for a greater story that puts the damage suffered in the context of the great many other things that are wrong with the world. In other words, forgiveness

comes when one can't bear living any more in the story in which one is simply and only a victim, not because that story has stopped being true but because it no longer seems like the whole truth. The reason one cannot instruct another person to forgive is because if the story of hurt and pain does seem like that other person's whole story, they simply won't be able to hear what you are saying.

But notice: when Jesus gives us a list of seven ways we should behave toward our enemies, forgiveness isn't one of them. Why not? I think the answer is, because he is talking about hatred and abuse and violence **that is still going on**. To suggest we should try to forgive something that is still going on is a theological misunderstanding. Jesus gives us plenty of ways to respond and engage while the hostile and cruel and destructive actions are still going on. But forgiveness has to wait until the activity is over. To suggest one can forgive something that is still going on amounts to saying that what is going on **is** the whole story and therefore that **it** is somehow ok. This is the force, it seems to me, behind the mother in the baptism story saying about the person who had dominated her life and overshadowed her relationship with God, "He's died now." There are certain relationships in which trying to be nice about things and using the language of forgiveness prematurely can be a form of collusion, a way of denying what is really going on, a way of suppressing anger and deepening the cycle of despair. In some such relationships there is such a level of self-deception and compulsion and profound disorder that the hurt really is "going on" ...until the day one or other of them dies. And the mother in the baptism story is saying she is discovering the astonishing, breath-taking resurrecting gift of forgiveness only now, now that that man who overshadowed her life is dead and gone.

Jesus is not asking us to forgive our enemies when their hostility to us is still going on. But he IS asking us to love these people. By recognizing that loving is not the same as forgiving, we can give up on the anxiety that loving equals condoning. Loving does not mean a kind of masochism that takes a perverse pleasure in being hurt and wounded. Loving does not mean that plotting to kill me is not a problem for me. You cannot tell someone to forgive, but as a follower of Jesus you can tell someone to love. So, what does loving mean, in the face of hatred and hostility, if it doesn't mean being a doormat and it doesn't mean having a warm feeling towards the hostile? It means carefully and doggedly - not passionately or sentimentally - following the words of Jesus **and the seven actions he commends to us**.

First, "Do good to those who hate you." Say by your actions, "However much you hate me I will never hate you." Remember this will end. Don't let these people turn you into a monster. Repay evil with good. Second, "Bless those who hate you." Mind your speech. Try not to lose your temper. Think of those who are hating and hurting you and see them as the little children they once were, longing - still? - for trust and safety, and speak to them as if they were still those little children. Third, "Pray for those who abuse you." Sometimes abuse IS incredibly difficult to become disentangled from. Remember God is always as much a part of any story as you are. In prayer, ask God to be made present not just to you but to your enemy as well. Fourth, "Offer the other cheek." In other words, not just don't get into a fight, because then there'll be no difference between you and them, but don't let those who hate you think you can be intimidated by violence. Offering the other cheek means saying "I'm not going to accept that violence trumps everything else." Fifth, "Don't withhold your shirt." In other words, surprise your enemy with your generosity, and thus show your enemies you have not, and will not, become like them. Sixth, "Give to everyone who begs." Remember, even when you can only think of how you have been hurt, there is always someone worse off than you, and reaching out to them is a way of rescuing yourself from self-pity. And seventh, "Don't ask for your property back." I think this means remember you will lose everything when you die so start living toward your possessions in such a way that your possessions do not determine who you are.

When we reach the end of Jesus' list, we realize that what Jesus has just described is what is about to happen to him. Jesus went to the cross **because** he loved his enemies. As he went to the cross he was hated, he was cursed, he was abused, he was struck, he was stripped of his clothes, and he was utterly humiliated. And yet at every step he responded with love. And the people who did these things to him were people like us. Only when it was almost over, when he was nailed to the cross, only **then** did Jesus go beyond the discipline of love and make that last step, and finally say "Father forgive them..." Up to that point he had loved his enemies. When it was over, he forgave them. And then, in the power of his resurrection, he showed us that evil **will** be overcome and the long shadow of sin over our lives **will** be removed. In Jesus' resurrection, and only in Jesus' resurrection, God gave us the power to love.

So, when Jesus is saying to us today love your enemies, he is saying: you have been my enemies, and I have loved you. Don't make me into a creature of your hatred but let me make you into a witness of my love.

## Conspiring Prayers

God of all the forgotten, neglected, and abused people, please enlarge our love that we may more effectively pray and join with you in working for their well-being. In the silences we offer, after our spoken words, speak to our thoughts that we may respond effectively.

Out of our concern for the world's poor we pray for the many whom the present world economic system condemns to a lifetime of grinding poverty. Silence

Out of our concern for the many forced to go without we pray for those communities in severe famine who can do nothing but wait in hope for aid agencies to fly in emergency food, medicines and other necessary resources. Silence

Out of our longing for justice we pray for all who are unjustly imprisoned, and those who are emotionally or physically persecuted. Silence

Out of our concern for the UK political landscape we pray for our country as it becomes increasingly polarised around dogma. We pray, especially, for all Members of Parliament who are at the sharpest end of those dogmas that divide our nation. Silence

We pray for ourselves, that the word of Christ may not fall on our ears in vain. Silence

In the stillness, we share with God our personal concerns...

In the name of Christ Jesus our Saviour, we offer our prayers. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

**Hymn StF 615 (Michael Forster)**

**Tune: Londonderry Air** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZUo4gGaq2c>

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,  
without the need to manage and to own ;  
a haven free from posing and pretending,  
where every weakness may be safely known.  
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,  
give me your love wherever we may go.

*As God loves us, so let us love each other:  
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.*

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,  
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free ;  
that helps us face the risk of truly living,

and makes us brave to be what we might be.  
Give me your strength when all my words are weakness ;  
give me your love in spite of all you know.

*Refrain*

Let love be real, with no manipulation,  
no secret wish to harness or control ;  
let us accept each other's incompleteness,  
and share the joy of learning to be whole.  
Give me your hope through dreams and  
disappointments ;  
give me your trust when all my failings show.

*Refrain*

**Blessing:** Let us go in peace, for we go in the name of Christ, to the glory of the Father In the power of the Spirit of God.  
**Amen.**