7th Sunday after Epiphany (L7C), February 23, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 6:27-38 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
Theology made the news recently. I tend to notice these things. As you might imagine, the beginning of the new presidential administration with its series of executive orders has sparked some heated discussion in theological and church circles online. From the more liberal side of the debate comes the reminder of various biblical injunctions to welcome the stranger and love your neighbor as yourself. From the more conservative side comes a response drawn from the early 5th century theologian Augustine of Hippo and the high medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas and labeled *ordo amoris*, which is Latin for "order of love." This teaching says that because we cannot take care of everyone, we are to care for those closest to us first. The phrase "charity begins at home" would belong in this category. Now for reasons of time, I'm not going to consider whether or how theological convictions are connected with government policy. We talked about that last fall in Adult Sunday School. But I do want to address this notion of the "order of love." And because Augustine is an important influencer of Luther's theology, I looked up his writing from which this idea originated and read a healthy chunk of the relevant section. Without going into detail, I'll just say that I don't think it supports what is being claimed of it, and in fact could actually be used to oppose it. Aquinas, on the other hand, was one of the theologians that Luther critiqued. I did not go and read him, but the root of Luther's opposition to his kind of theology was that it de-radicalized Jesus' teaching and made merely about common sense. And in doing so, it effectively did away with the need for Jesus death and resurrection.

How timely, then is today's Gospel reading, a prime example of Jesus' radical message that flies in the face of common sense. These are hard sayings of Jesus, shocking even. They are disorienting and provoke self-examination. I get why you would want to soften them, or explain them away with other things that Jesus said. But that would turn the gospel into something it's not. This text means to hold a mirror up to ourselves, to reveal how our assumptions and loyalties diverge from God's intentions for us, and to show us the need for Jesus' saving work.

Maybe the most upsetting thing about this reading today is the way it undermines our sense of who we are. Everything that we can point to to demonstrate that we are good, respectable people is dismissed out of hand by Jesus as nothing special. We love those who love us. We are good family people. We put our children first. We care for our parents. We're loyal to our friends. We're responsible citizens. We vote. We pay our taxes. We might even volunteer our time and resources to worthy causes. Good for you, says Jesus, but even sinners do that. (I should pause here and mention that Jesus is not using the term sinners in the theological sense that we Lutherans like to use it. He is using it in the cultural sense of "lowlifes" or "those people who are not our people." All non-Jews fit into this category.) So Jesus is saying that none of your decent, respectable behavior in any way distinguishes you from those people you like to think of yourself as superior to. Oof!

Then maybe the second most upsetting thing here is how Jesus' teaching confounds our sense of justice and fairness. Love your enemies? Really? Do good to those who hate you? Pray for those who abuse you? Come on! Do you mean, Jesus, the radical Muslim terrorists who crashed planes into New York skyscrapers? Do you mean those people who victimize children? Do you mean people who shoot up schools and movie theaters and concerts? Love those people? Not only is this outrageous, it's unrealistic. We *can't* do that. We're not wired that way. It's no

wonder we don't talk very much about these particular sayings of Jesus. No one is asking for *these* words to be posted on public monuments. "If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." Can you imagine that being posted on our courthouse walls? Or Jesus' advice to "turn the other cheek"?

All of that is bad enough, but maybe most offensive of all is Jesus telling his disciples that loving their enemies, doing good, lending without expecting to be repaid, and so on, show them to be "children of the Most High." And why? Because God is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Let me say that again. God is kind to the *ungrateful* and the *wicked*. Kindness to the ungrateful and wicked is a characteristic of God. Do we even *want* that kind of God?

If we are honest, we have to admit that rubs us the wrong way. It flies in the face of our cultural antipathy toward the so-called "undeserving poor," the people we resist showing kindness to because of their poor choices and bad moral character. It's offensive to be told that we should help those who are unwilling to help themselves. It goes against our common sense. We shouldn't "give a man a fish" when we should be "teaching him to fish." We shouldn't give money to the homeless because they might go buy drugs. And we shouldn't have government programs that give handouts to people who are poor because of their bad choices and immoral lifestyles. Kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked strikes directly at the core of everything we hold to be good, right, and decent. And yet kindness to the ungrateful and wicked is a characteristic of God and God's children.

So where does that leave us? Can we even consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus if we are so fundamentally resistant to these difficult teachings? Can we rightly consider ourselves Jesus' disciples if we dismiss or ignore what he says here?

The irony, and the saving grace of Jesus' words is that precisely our resistance to this teaching puts us in the company of the ungrateful and wicked to whom God is kind. How do we even sing Amazing Grace with a straight face when we harbor such contradictory convictions? God knows what a pickle we're in, and that we're not getting out of it on our own. The cross of Jesus, his death and resurrection for us and for our salvation is the solution we don't deserve, the solution that rewrites our script and opens up new possibilities. In Jesus, God has loved us in spite of our ungratefulness and our wickedness so that we might be changed, so that we might begin to live out of the promise made to us in Holy Baptism that we *are* in fact children of God, and that by faith we might begin to manifest the character of God in our relationship with the world around us.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I don't claim that any of this is easy, or even realistic. Far from it. I *don't* see how it's possible to love my enemy, to give away my hard-earned resources, to *not* seek justice when I or others are wronged. But what we dare not do is pretend that Jesus didn't mean any of this, or that he really meant the opposite of what he said, as if he really mean "God loves those who help themselves," "charity begins at home," and other pious evasions of his difficult words. We must, at minimum, live in the tension of knowing that our cherished attitudes and way of life are challenged by Jesus and belied by God's love for the world in him. We can't just make the difficulty go away, which is of course our natural impulse. But here's the good news: living in that tension, drives us to the promise that in him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is at work, to transform our innate opposition by freeing us from the grip that sin, death, and evil have on us. God means to transform our wickedness and ungratefulness into kindness and love. Only God can make that happen. Only God *will* make that happen. May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding and confounds all expectations, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.