

**Sunday, February 24 and Wednesday, February 27, 2019**  
**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany + Luke 6:27-38**  
**“Holy Encounters”**

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI  
Rev. Nancy M. Raabe

*Give to everyone who begs from you.*

A story. At the homeless ministry where I used to work in downtown Columbus Ohio, one day I was wearing a small cross necklace from the sale rack at Kohl's. As I was visiting with people in the lunch line, a woman grabbed at the necklace and said, “That’s so pretty. Can I have it?” I was a startled but took it off and gave it to her.

Two things: First, she seemed to fully expect I would do that. Second, in my memory that necklace has become a sacred thing, made holy by that encounter, of far greater value than half-price from Kohl's. *Give to everyone who begs from you.*

*And if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.*

Another story from Ohio. Our family has always been accustomed to leaving our doors unlocked. Don't tell our insurance agent, but this is just how we've always been, and it's one of the many things I love about Holy Trinity. We also had the habit of leaving our garage door open. I don't know, it just seemed like a friendly sign that someone was home.

Our house was a block from a busy intersection. One day I was turning up the street to walk our dog. Coming toward me was a couple out for a walk who were waving their arms wildly at me. “That man, that man, he just went into your garage and stole

your toolbox!” they yelled. I hadn’t seen him because I was heading away from the house, but I regret to say that they knew, from his appearance, that he wasn’t from the neighborhood. This was a suburb where DWB was likely to get you pulled over, no matter what your station in life.

I turned around and saw the man, who was by then down at the intersection sitting on a bench, clutching the bright red toolbox waiting for the bus. The dog and I trotted over and I sat down next to him. I said in a friendly way, “Hi there! I think you might have something of ours.” He began to cry, said he was sorry, that he shouldn’t have done it. We struck up a conversation. .

I was just starting to ask him about his situation and what kind of help he really needed when a terrible thing happened – a police car pulled up. The couple had called the police the moment they saw the man come out of our garage. I tried to wave off the cops: “No, no, everything’s fine! We’ve worked it out!” but to no avail. The officers weren’t interested in anything I had to say, shoved the man into the car, and drove off.

Two things about that: I regretted I hadn’t had the chance to give the man the toolbox as a gift. Then it would have been his – no stolen property! If I had done that, our interaction would have been a beautiful expression of what Martin Luther calls “mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren,” in that the full intent of the law (you stole my toolbox!) is always to communicate God’s grace (here, take it, and how else can I help?). This how we gain new sisters and brothers in Christ. *And if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.*

Last week in his “blessings and woes” right before today’s reading, Jesus was turning us toward the kingdom of God, the new creation, God’s rule on earth that is governed by love instead of fear. He’s positioning us to see it clearly. “Blessed are you who are poor for yours in the kingdom of God”, meaning that once you let go of all your material attachments, you can see that you already have everything you need. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation,” meaning that if your stuff and your money is your ultimate concern in life, then that’s all you’ll ever know.

Now we have listened to Jesus’ call and entered the kingdom. How do we know we are there? Because Jesus is talking to us in the present—those who listen, us, believers in Jesus. “But I say to you that listen...”

In these verses Jesus is telling us about kingdom living. He’s not giving us a set of rules for a moral and ethical life, a series of “shoulds,” but a description of how we relate to others, how the dynamic web of human interaction functions in the kingdom of God. And the fact is that kingdom living turns all the world’s learned behaviors on their head.

We have to be aware of this context, because otherwise it sounds like Jesus is just setting us up to fail: Love your enemies? Yeah right –what planet are you from?

Here is how it works. There is someone in your life who really doesn't like you, who’s always out to get you? Fantastic! That gives you the opportunity to give them a friendly smile and a wave every time you cross paths.

Someone lashes out at you and says horrible things? Terrific! That gives you the opportunity to ask what's really bothering them and show them a level of compassion they may not have ever experienced.

You're on the highway, and an annoying tailgater guns their car, honks, and gives you the finger as they zoom ahead? That's great! Smile and wave as they pass, thank God that you have peace in Christ, and reflect on what kind of stress might be making them act like that, and say a prayer for them.

And if someone asks for your necklace, stunning! Give them your earrings, too.

With this in mind, what Jesus then says makes perfect sense. If you like only those people who like you, what good is that? How will you ever grow in your knowledge and experience of the human condition? If you lend money expecting to get it back, why set yourself up for the high probability of being consumed with anger when that doesn't happen? Instead, be glad you can help someone start to dig out of their financial hole and pray that whatever money then comes their way can help them climb a rung higher. Thank God that you had a bit of spare change in the first place.

We are loved and forgiven by an infinitely merciful God. This is the gospel truth! If we receive that gift, how can we keep that to ourselves? How can we not share it at every opportunity? We are blessed with the knowledge of Jesus Christ, with the spirit of reconciliation, with a heart of love, with inner peace, with necklaces, with spare shirts, and maybe with a few extra bucks here and there. So how can we not share our blessings with those who seek them? Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Amen.