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Reframe: If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?

Matthew 5:43-48

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Moving through life, we learn that there are different versions of annoying people: There's the "Know-it-All" who's always right, hates to be corrected, and wants you to know that they know way more than you know. They don't work well on a team, and when things fall apart, it's always someone else's fault. Then there's "The Interrupter" who doesn't let you get a word in edgeways – either because they're not listening or listening just closely enough to jump into the convo the moment you take a breath. And then there's the "The Whiner" whose favorite phrase is some version of "Life is so unfair!" And because complaining is their superpower, they'll do it for hours but never offer any positive solutions.

Our Lenten Series that we're calling "Reframe" is designed to help us reframe our view of the world in a way that creates life and more life.

Traditionally, this reframing process has been called "Repentance." Jesus had a lot to say about that – he was continually challenging his followers to rethink, reframe their lives, to go in a new direction by renewing their minds – literally exchanging their minds with the mind of the Spirit. That's what repentance is: reframing everything in a healthy new direction.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the Sermon on the Mount. So much so that we could probably call the Sermon on the Mount The Great Reframing. In Matthew, chapters 5 through 7, Jesus challenges his followers to reframe their understanding of God, themselves, and others. At least a half dozen times, Jesus reminded his followers of the conventional framing when he told them, "You've heard it said, 'You shall not do this, that, or those other things.'" The challenge to reframe came in the next breath when Jesus said, "But I say to you...." Jesus wanted them to go in an entirely new direction. Jesus had a strategy for helping people to do just that – he asked questions. Lots of questions. Three hundred and seven, to be exact. Probing questions can evoke deeper thinking and

challenge us to come to new conclusions. In other words, Jesus' questions invite us to reframe everything. In the last of several questions in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus posed a question at the center of what we're thinking about today: "*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?*" That question is as relevant today as it was when Jesus first asked it.

Let's read the passage. Matthew 5:43-48 [NRSV] "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

All right, just to be sure we heard that right: Love the haters, bless those who curse you, return unkindness with kindness, and when someone gives you a hard time, take a moment and pray for them. Wow. Talk about reframing difficult people! So, how should we understand this? Let me unpack this just a bit.

If we were to reframe Jesus's words for our 21st-century context, we might hear Jesus say something like this: "You've heard it said, when someone cuts you off in traffic, speed up and ride their bumper, let them know much they annoyed you. But I say, take a deep breath, back away and let them go on their way." Or this: "You've heard it said, when the cashier gives you too much change back from your purchase, take the money and run. But I say to you, instead of taking the money and running, take a moment to pause and consider why they might be distracted. It might be because they're working two jobs to support their family, and one of their kids is home, sick with the flu. Or this: You've heard it said when someone does something annoying to you, dish it right back at them. But I say to you, stop dwelling on what they did or said to you and spend that same energy

reflecting on why they annoy you. The work of reframing is hard work mostly because it's about dying – about the death of things that don't bring life and reframing how we think about things. I have to do this in my life all the time. So let me suggest a couple of things that have been helpful to me.

First, when dealing with difficult people, it's important to start here: **REFRAMING BEGINS WITH US**. There's a good chance that the people on our "*List of Difficult People*" have a "*List of Difficult People*" as well. And there's an equally good chance that we're on their list. The truth is, everybody is on everybody's list because we're all difficult people. We don't get to reframe anyone else's life or decide who is and who is not on their list because that never goes well. The rethinking that we're called to do begins with each of us asking ourselves what we can do to move toward healing, experience more compassion, and bring more life to every relationship.

In the recovery community, Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon for Families, this is known as "Keeping your side of the street clean." The wisdom in this is simple: rather than focus on what *others* need to do or how *others* need to change to make something work, you reframe it: you shift the focus away from others to what you can change and improve. By focusing on yourself, including your behaviors and responses to things, you can influence a situation. In most instances, focusing on what another person needs to do will get you nowhere since you cannot control another person. So, try this: the next time you find yourself in a difficult situation with a friend, spouse, sibling, or other relationship, reframe - shift your focus away from what you want the other person to do. Instead, focus on what you might be able to do differently. Are you able to change your response? Can you reframe your perspective? If so, you may find that the other individual will respond to you differently based on your changes.

When we do this kind of reframing, we come to grips with the reality that we really don't like the know-it-all because we often feel insecure about what we don't know. We don't like the interrupter because we think what we have to say is more important. And we may not like the whiner

because we don't feel as free to complain about things in our lives. Reframing begins with us.

Second, difficult people are created and loved by God. So let me ask you to do something. I want you to bring to mind someone you find a wee bit on the prickly side. Imagine them standing on an elementary school playground. Maybe by the monkey bars or swings. Doesn't matter. Now, imagine them standing there... but standing right next to them is Jesus. And Jesus has his hand around their shoulder. He's comforting them because they are – just like you and me, hurting, broken by the world around them. It's not an easy image to hold, but it creates some common ground when we do that. And when we stand on common ground together, the view changes.

We learn on the first page of the book of Genesis that God created humankind in God's image [Genesis 1:27]. That means that every person we encounter is created in the image of God. Our family members, our barista, our coworkers, our bosses, and our daughter-and-sons-in-law are created in the image of God. The guy who cut us off in traffic two days ago, the woman arguing about a 20-cent coupon in the checkout line right along with the frustrated cashier, all of them are created in the image of God. Everyone is carrying the breath of God in them, despite how they act and what they do. Each person has unique strengths, purpose, and potential that were placed in them by God. If you're a parent or a grandparent, at some point, you've looked into the face of your son or granddaughter and were just blown away with love. You've been amazed by their gifts and celebrated their uniqueness. God created every person with love and care. When that becomes the lens through which we look at others, a kind of love begins to grow.

When we encounter difficult people from that perspective – that they too are created and loved by God and are dealing with their own versions of brokenness by the world, our perspective begins to change. We see them not so much as someone to put up with, endure, or manage but as someone who bears the image of God's love and goodness. When we do that, things begin to change; compassion begins to settle in, and love begins to grow. I imagine the scene of the Sermon on the

Mount. Jesus is looking out on the vast crowd of people and has so much compassion in his heart for them. In the language of the bible, they are like sheep without a shepherd; alone, afraid, lost, confused, and hurt. And who of us hasn't felt that way – hasn't experienced some version of that narrative? Something happens in us when we reframe others and begin to see difficult people through the eyes of Jesus. Something in us begins to change. When we are honest about our hurt and vulnerabilities, we begin to identify with those around us who are hurting and in need of rescue. God calls us to have compassion for others. And when we start with compassion, that allows us to reframe challenging relationships.

The good news here is that even difficult people are created in the image of God and loved extravagantly by God. God knows us completely – every flaw, every fear, every sketchy behavior – and loves us fully and completely. God loves us without hesitation or condition. In the same way, we get to love others as God loves us, without hesitation or condition. We get to make that our life's work – loving others, especially difficult people, those we don't agree with, and people who don't seem to care. But you might be wondering, how does that work? Well, only works with the Spirit's help.

So, how do we make this practical? Let's try this. First, spend some quiet moments reflecting on a short list of people who tend to make life challenging for you. You might even want to write their names on a piece of paper adding just a few words to remind you of what is so challenging.

Then, as you look at that list, ask yourself if there is any possibility that if they were doing this same exercise, your name could be on their list too. Is it possible that the things they do that bother you might actually be bothering them too?

Finally, pray for them. Give thanks to God that they too are created by God. Acknowledge that God is at also at work in them. Finally, spend some moments praying about this. Pray that God would soften your heart toward them. Ask God to open a space in your heart to be open to them, ask God to help you find just one thing that you could love about them too. By doing that we'll discover the great reframing that God is up to in all of us.