

Christians Don't Give Up on People

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Preaching on:

Luke 5:1–10

When Abraham Lincoln first met Edwin Stanton, they were both lawyers and they were supposed to be working together on the same case. It didn't go well. Edwin Stanton said about Lincoln (loudly enough to be overheard and recorded in history) "Where did that long-armed creature come from and what can he expect to do in this case?" Lincoln was mortified at being denied a role on the legal team, but he remained in court anyway to listen to Stanton's argument, and he was gracious enough to remark to friends how greatly he admired Stanton's oratory skills and his knowledge of the law.

But this did nothing to raise Stanton's opinion of Lincoln. Throughout the years Stanton lobbed all kinds of insults at the future president. He called Lincoln a clown. He said that explorers were foolish to search for the then-mythical gorilla in Africa when they could easily capture one in Springfield, IL. After Lincoln became president, Stanton publicly called him a baboon and an imbecile and criticized his handling of the Civil War.

And then in the midst of that very conflict, Lincoln (a Republican) called upon Stanton (a prominent democrat) to become his Secretary of War. Lincoln knew that Stanton was opinionated, and stubborn, and not easily liked, but Lincoln did his best to like him anyway, to understand him, and to believe in his human ability to rise up and to share with Lincoln the burden of the hardest job in the world.

Three years later, on the night of Lincoln's assassination, Stanton rushed to be by his President's side. Stanton, not known to be an emotional man, wept beside Lincoln's unconscious body. And learning of Lincoln's death the next morning, Stanton said, "Now he belongs to the ages." While Lincoln was laid in state in the White House for his funeral, Stanton was overheard saying, "There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen." It's incredible what can happen when you don't give up on people.

In order to not give up on people, you have to understand love in the way that I must assume Lincoln understood love. Love is most often celebrated in our culture as the fireworks that happen when you walk into a party and lock eyes with someone across the room—and you just know, right away, that they're the one. But love is so much more than an emotion to jazz up a deep, pre-existing affinity for another person. When a perfect couple falls in love, that's nice—maybe even beautiful—but it's not exactly a miracle, is it? But love can do so much more. Because love is patient. Love, like water over a rock, knows how to take its time. Love doesn't know exactly what the rough rock will look years and years from now, but love has the confidence to know that even the roughest of relationships can be smoothed as long as you don't turn off the faucet—as long as you don't give up.

I know what you're thinking—that it's worse in our country now than it ever has been. That our opponents are truly evil people. That our discourse has fallen off a cliff. That our culture has regressed. I'll just remind you that the 1860s and the years that led up to them were a far worse time in American history. A Civil War was being fought—the bloodiest war ever at the time. 2% of the US population died on the battlefield of that war. 4 million Black men, women, and children were held in the brutal bondage of chattel slavery. Abraham Lincoln was the commander and chief of the Union Army and in some sense the blood of hundreds of thousands of people was on his hands. But while Lincoln waged war on the Confederacy, he never gave up on the South. And while he emancipated the slaves, he never gave up on the slaveowners. He was one of the rare people who could balance justice and mercy, war and compassion, boundaries and love. And that is why he belongs to the ages—because Lincoln never gave up on the Union and he never gave up on the people (North or South, slave or free, Republican or Democrat) who made up that union.

Christians don't give up on people either. We don't give up on people because God has never and will never give up on us. It's remarkable to leave 99 sheep alone and unprotected to search for one lost sheep. It's wasteful to burn more in oil than the value of the little coin you're looking for. But that's how God encourages us to love. If we're too safe in our loving, God asks us to take a risk. If we love prudently, God pushes us toward love foolishly, extravagantly, without counting the cost. If we go to

war with someone, God demands we do not cut them out of our hearts or our prayers.

We Christians don't give up on people. And, ideally, that means we don't grumble about the fact that all the attention isn't always on us—the well behaved 99. We don't complain about the wasted resources of the lamp lit all night long—that's expensive you know! Because we remember that everybody gets a little lost in the dark from time to time. Don't you get a little lost every once in a while? If the light is always left on for someone, that means on the night I get lost, it will already be lit for me.

We Christians don't give up on people. But it's not easy, you know? Because giving up is so easy to do, you might not even know you're doing it! You don't have to say out loud three times, "I give up! I give up! I give up!" There are subtler ways to do it. If someone insults you, just take it personally. If someone disagrees with you, hold a grudge. If someone says something you don't like, stop listening to them. When the world feels dangerous, stay at home. When church feels hard, stay away. When one sheep gets lost, just tell yourself you're staying with the 99 because it's your responsibility to keep them safe too. When one coin gets lost, just tell yourself it's not worth your time or effort. It's easy to give up without ever admitting we've quit at all. And so we always need to watch ourselves, to check our hearts in prayer, to make sure we're not checking out on the world, to make sure we don't give up on people.

Beloved, on this Celebration Sunday, we have so much to celebrate. God has never and will never give up on us. We will never give up on other people. As a church, over the next program year, we are going to pour our resources into seeking lost sheep and celebrating together. We know that love can do amazing things if we just give love a few opportunities and a little time. We are confident that God is with us and we are committed to being with one another.

Perfection is a mirage! We will never be perfect. And we will never all think or act alike. Do we even really want that? It sounds like the beginning of a piece of dystopian fiction. But we have something so much better than all that: We don't give up on people! And that is a reason to celebrate.