

Loving Our Enemies
Luke 6:27-36, Luke 10
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Today we begin a month-long journey that asks the question, in a roundabout way, why are we here today instead of sitting at home reading the Sunday edition of the New York Times? In a world that is increasingly secular, in a world where the influence of the church has never been less, why do we bother? Why God? Why Jesus? Why Church?

What do we have to offer the world? What is unique about the Christian message for the 21st century? What unique solutions do we have for the challenges each of us faces, and the challenges of our culture and society that are not simply about us? With that in mind, we turn to the sixth chapter of Luke, to what has come to be called the Sermon on the Plain in this gospel, which includes many passages also found in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is speaking to those gathered around him.

Son of Baldwin writes one of those social commentary blogs on the website, "Medium," that has an almost cult following. He has a particularly contemporary take on the world.

Almost exactly one year ago today, he published a post called "Let Them _____ Die." Well, that actually wasn't the title. He inserted a gerund between "Them" and "Die" that is one of those seven words you still can't say on television without bleeping it.

It was, of all things, a reflection that compared two cultural moments in history. In the first, he reminds us of the terrorist shooting of Congressman Steve Scalise at the Congressional baseball practice session last year. Scalise is infamous for his anti-gay, anti-feminist and arguably racist views. One of the heroes of that attack was Crystal Griner, a Capitol Police officer on his security detail who engaged the attacker in a fire fight, drawing the gunman's fire and placing herself between the gunman and members of Congress. Crystal is an African-American lesbian.

Son of Baldwin compares that event to an episode of the 1970s comedy, "The Jeffersons", the one featuring the dry cleaner, former neighbors of Archie and Edith Bunker, who "Move on Up" to the East Side to their deluxe apartment in the sky. The Norman Lear comedy was not afraid to tackle serious issues and Son of Baldwin wants us to remember the seventh season episode called "At the Wrong Meeting," where George and his next-door neighbor attend a meeting of tenants in their building to talk about the rise of crime in their neighborhood. It turns out, the meeting is a recruiting effort by an upscale version of the Ku Klux Klan. After George spars with the hateful host, the man has a heart attack and George, the only black man in the room, is the only one who knows CPR. He revives the man, who,

when he learns who saved him turns to his son and says, "You should have let me die."

Son of Baldwin suggests Crystal should have followed that advice and let the Congressman die. He goes on to suggest that the Christian value, stated by Jesus in today's text and several others, to love our enemies is hopelessly naive and self-defeating. He asserts that oppressed people should "turn their compassion inward," act in their own self-interest and never take action to save people who are hateful or who support their oppression. To do otherwise is to empower evil. There it is friends. There's the contemporary argument against Jesus's way of living.

Why should we Love our enemies? Even hateful people? Even racist and homophobic people? Even misogynists and abusive people? Even Samaritans? This is the powerful message of Jesus parable.

It was because this text and the Matthew passage like it raised so many difficult questions that the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. determined that he needed to preach on these moral lessons of Jesus at least once every year of his Atlanta pastorate. Sixty-one years ago, Dr. King began a sermon on this text with these words: "[O]ver the centuries, many persons have argued that ["Love Your Enemies"] is an extremely difficult command. Many would go so far as to say that it just isn't possible to move out into the actual practice of this glorious command. They would go on to say that this is just additional proof that Jesus was an impractical idealist who never quite came down to earth...But far from being an impractical idealist, Jesus has become the practical realist. The words of this text glitter in our eyes with a new urgency. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies."

Was Dr. King, right? Is love, particularly love for our enemies, the love that will save the world? Or was Dr. King merely trapped in a self-destructive view of piety as "Son of Baldwin" suggests? Let's start with one of our most basic propositions. In whose image is humanity created? If we believe that you and I are created in the image of God, doesn't it logically follow that everyone is equally created in that image? True, some people become so captive to evil that it becomes almost impossible to see the image of God within them, but foundational to our understanding of God and grace is that God is still capable of seeing God's own image in the most lost, the most evil, the most broken of our fellow children of God. And that is actually our great hope.

But if that is true, then how do we dare deny the image of God in even the most detestable of people? Even when they take positions that are diametrically opposed to us? In Son of Baldwin's view of the world, there are those we should just write off, stop raising a finger to save. We should let them surrender to their fates even if we have the opportunity to help them, even save them. But if Son of Baldwin is right, then Jesus' death and resurrection mean nothing. There is no resurrection hope; life is simply an exercise in karma. You get what you deserve

— I am only concerned with myself and getting what I need for me, my family and those who agree with me. That, my friends, is not a world that can survive. And it is certainly not a world where reconciliation is possible.

Just let the hateful people die. Just let the bigots starve. Let the oppressors be torn limb from limb by the angry mob that finally rises up. Is that the world we want?

When we sacrifice compassion, when we sacrifice the image of God within our enemies, then we sacrifice our own humanity or, at the very least, we sacrifice our Christian hope.

But are we supposed to be walked all over by evil people? Aren't we supposed to resist? How does what Jesus said here work in a world where children are trafficked by evil men and people of color have to face bigotry and social and economic oppression every day and women are still treated as property in some places and LGBTQ+ folks are still attacked on the streets of American cities for holding hands or just being themselves? Surely, we don't just stand idly by?

Of course not. That's one of the reasons we need to take a closer look at one of Jesus' specific admonitions in this text: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also." In many versions of this sentence, the Greek actually reads "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek" and that's important. In the ancient world, only the right hand was used for contact with others. The left hand was reserved for functions that were, shall we say, not sanitary. So, if my only contact with you is with my right hand, the only way I can strike your right cheek, is with the back of my hand, a blow that in the ancient world, according to Theologian Walter Wink, was a demeaning sign of disrespect, a sign of power over, a dehumanizing gesture. If you back-hand me and I turn to offer you only my left cheek, I am defying your efforts to demean me. What if Jesus is saying in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, let your actions say "I refuse to be humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't humiliate me without my permission and that's been withdrawn."

There are ways we can stand up to the demeaning actions of others without resorting to a tit-for-tat, hate-for-hate exchange that leaves us all dehumanized. Yes, there are times when justice demands defensive action. That's why there is a Just War Doctrine that permits self-defense and defense of others in certain circumstances but that always views war as sinful and something to be avoided if at all possible, because, in war, dehumanization is unavoidable. You are not a person, you are my enemy.

But most of the time, for you and me, facing the choice to love our enemies doesn't involve global conflict. It's the decision of reacting to emotional or political or rhetorical or personal violence with violence of our own. It is interesting that Gandhi said, "Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and His teaching is non-violent, except Christians."

Again, turning to Dr. King, in another sermon, he said: "Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding ... to annihilate rather than to convert" (attributed to his "Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story").

What Jesus demonstrates when he says "love our enemies" is a way of living in the world without resorting to violence in any capacity other than as a last resort of defense of self or others, a way of overcoming domination in all of its forms by using a way that will not create new forms of violence. In the past, we have thought we had only two choices, either resist evil or don't resist evil. But we were wrong to think that Jesus was asking us to be a doormat for God, to give up all concern for our own justice as well as the justice of others. Now we see in this passage, interpreted in a new light, that Jesus is not calling on people to be passive. He is calling on us to resist, yes, but to resist in a way that that does not annihilate but makes room for conversion and repentance.

Of course, most of us don't face the violence of an evil regime, but each of us is provoked by another from time to time, belittled by a system or a person in authority. Each of us finds ourselves in conflict with someone from time to time. And will we escalate and meet violent words and feelings with violent words and feelings? Or will we stand up for others and for ourselves without surrendering love for our enemies?

Oh, yes, one of the things Son of Baldwin seemed to gloss over in that Jefferson's episode was the hateful, racist man. He isn't changed by being saved by a black man, but his son? His son's eyes are opened. He sees Jefferson for the first time as a fellow child of God, no longer as an object of hate. And he is transformed. One of the main reasons we cannot surrender our love for enemies is that we don't want to surrender to the hope that our children will no longer be enemies.

Ask the people of Northern Ireland. Ask the British and Germans. If we cling to our love for the enemy, some day by God's good grace, we can find a way to be family again. And so, Christ's words echo across the ages, from a cross on Calvary through a Birmingham jail, and from a Memphis lunch counter to a peaceful demonstration along the Dan Ryan yesterday. We pray they will continue to echo through the words and actions of all who follow the carpenter from Galilee, and all who seek a just peace, and so may they echo in all our living. Amen.