

Luke 6: 27-49
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Hearts and Hands

“But I say to you that listen...” With these words, Jesus launches into the second part of his Sermon on the Plain. Those words can also be read as, “If you’re *still* listening...”¹ It’s a way of checking in to draw back the disciples and the crowd. There’s a good chance that he has flustered or even angered those who are laughing, well-fed, and/or well-heeled with his words about woe for those in their shoes, warnings about thinking we’re somehow on God’s good list because we have all that we need. And he may have riled up others who hear his words of blessing and warning as a rallying cry to dole out holy woe on the wealthy and well-heeled in God’s name. There’s also the word *but* in there. “*But* before you get carried away,” Jesus seems to say, “before you misunderstand and run off and misquote me, hear this, too: Love your enemies...turn the other cheek...pray for those who mistreat you.” Does anyone else want to turn around and go back to that blessings part? That was hard; this is harder. When dividing lines are being drawn in concrete at every turn, when troops are lining up at borders around the world and in our own communities, when we are worn out from the endless skirmishes and exhausted by the bullies, the last thing I want to be told to do is love the ones who hurt me and mine.

Our tradition is not the only one that calls its followers to such lofty goals. This past week, I was reminded that Buddhism does as well. At one point in the conversation, Sharon Salzburg, an author and practicing Buddhist, said:

The word ‘love’ is so loaded. And our fear, of course, is that it means something very passive and complacent, and I’m going to let people hurt me, and I’m going to let them

¹ Sarah Henrich, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-627-38-2>

oppress other people, and I'm going to be a doormat. It's very hard to see love as a force, as a power rather than as a weakness.²

She is right, of course. The word *love* is loaded, as is this passage from Luke. This passage has been weaponized by those who act anything other than loving to insist that spouses stay in abusive relationships or that Jesus is calling us to be passive. But Salzburg is right: love is anything but passive. Love is a force and that is just what Jesus wants his disciples to hear. Love is the guiding force by which he calls his disciples, his church, his body to live. It is the primary force by which he lives after all.

I stumbled upon yet another holiday that I forgotten existed this past week, Random Acts of Kindness Day. I saw posts of people and companies flooding their neighborhoods and workplaces with lovely acts of beauty and kindness. Some gave out flowers to strangers. Others posted words of encouragement in public places. It was lovely, and it is not what Jesus is telling us to do. Yes, it is good to make a stranger smile. It is right to be intentional about spreading goodness wherever and whenever we can. *And* the life of the disciple community is about more than the occasional random act. To live as Jesus' disciples is to be continually and constantly shaped and formed and spurred on by love, love that is forceful, patient, humble, courageous and, yes, kind.

Daryl Davis is a Black musician who grew up going to integrated schools around the world. A child of parents in the foreign service, Davis could never make sense of the divisions he found when he returned to the US. When Davis was 10 years old, "a group of white people hurled bottles, soda cans and rocks at him."³ He was stunned and confused:

² Interview transcript, <https://onbeing.org/programs/sharon-salzberg-robert-thurman-love-your-enemies-really/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html>

‘My 10-year-old brain could not process the idea that someone who had never seen me, who had never spoken to me, who knew nothing about me, would want to inflict pain upon me for no other reason than the color of my skin.’

‘How can you hate me, he remembers wondering, ‘when you don’t even know me?’⁴

Later as an adult, when he was playing piano at a bar in Maryland, a patron approached him and said Davis was the first Black person he’d heard who could play as well as Jerry Lee Lewis.

Davis shared that he and Lewis were friends and that Lewis had learned much of what he knew from other black musicians. The man wasn’t convinced and told Davis he was in the Ku Klux Klan. Amazingly, Davis and the man continued to talk and left as friends. Davis repeated this pattern time and time again. He now has a collection of hundreds of hoods and robes from people who have left the Klan after becoming friends with him. One former Grand Dragon, Scott Shepherd even credits Davis with saving his life:

‘Daryl extended his hand and actually just extended his heart, too, and we became brothers.’ Shepherd ended up leaving the Klan and gave his robes to Davis.⁵

He extended his hand *and* his heart to an enemy, to one who had previously believed that Davis was sub-human. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says. “Keep praying for those who mistreat you.” And it is hard to do these things from a safe distance. In an interview a few years back, Davis said:

What’s the purpose of meeting with each other when we already agree? Find someone who disagrees and invite them to your table. Invite your enemy to talk. Give them a platform to talk because then they will reciprocate. Invite your enemies to sit down and join you. You never know; some small thing you say might give them food for thought,

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/26/opinion/racism-politics-daryl-davis.html>

and you will learn from them. Establish dialogue. It's when the talking stops that the ground becomes fertile for fighting.⁶

It's when the talking stops... In recent months, I am guessing you can imagine a whole host of scenarios where the talking—or perhaps more pointedly—the listening has stopped. I can. I am guilty of wanting to tune out those with whom I disagree. And tuning them out easily leads to dismissing them out of hand, and that's where these words from Jesus are both a gut punch and a wakeup call.

I want to be crystal clear. I recognize that this text has been misused to silence people who are trapped in abusive relationships and those who have been historically dismissed and belittled. I do not believe that is Jesus' intent. Nor do I believe that it is the responsibility of Daryl Davis or other people of color to fix the racial divide. I do however believe that there is a powerful witness in Davis's work, something the entire Christian community can learn from in his persistent, courageous, and radical practices. And these practices are radical in the most fundamental way. Radical means at the root, of course, beginning at the beginning. *Love your enemies*, Jesus says. It does not get any more radical than that. And in case we have forgotten, even we polite Presbyterians are called to be radical in the very same way.

Luke's first audience may not have had many opportunities to engage their enemies in conversation. They were not given the chance to sit at the table and reason with the Romans, but Jesus still called them to love them, to pray for them. They were also ostracized from the synagogue by leaders who feared and deeply disagreed with their following Jesus, and through Luke's words, Jesus still expects them to love and pray for them, too—all of them. For Luke's original audience the enemy lines were clear. The lines are also clear for Daryl Davis. Those

⁶ <https://guardianlv.com/2013/11/kkk-member-walks-up-to-black-musician-in-bar-but-its-not-a-joke-and-what-happens-next-will-astound-you/>

lines are not always as clear for me. I do not fear for my life because of the color of my skin or what I believe or who I worship. And I don't like to admit that I have enemies; it is not how I was brought up. But not everyone loves me or what I represent. I have disappointed some and angered others for what I have done or said or refused to say. *And* I am called to love them whether they love me back or not. If I'm honest, I'm not all that good at it most days. And there is no way I can simply will myself to try. But that's just it; Jesus does not expect me or us to will ourselves in to loving our enemies. This love is not something we generate all on our own. Love does not start with us. We receive love and learn how to love from God first. As one translation reads:

Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.⁷

It is so simple and so hard and so easy to forget. Yet, this is who we are called to be by the one who gives his life for us. This call is not simply aspirational; an enemy-loving community is who Jesus fully expects his church to be. Period.

As he moves to the end of the sermon, Jesus wonders aloud, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?"⁸ As the world blessedly and hopefully opens up more in the coming months, there will be new opportunities for people to get to know who we are and what we're about. A year ago, the Pastor Nominating Committee and I stood in this chancel and recorded a top-secret video that would be shared in April. I imagined your faces and your voices as I dreamed about what we would do and who we would be together. After eight months of serving alongside you, I know that this is a community who loves. We love to worship; we love to laugh; we love to study; we love to serve; we love to sing; we love to eat; we love. My prayer

⁷ Luke 6: 36, The Message

⁸ Luke 6: 46, NRSV

is that we continue to unleash that love on those who love us back and on those who do not, to keep extending our hands and our hearts to those who welcome us and those who do not. And when we stumble—because we *will* stumble—may we listen again to our one true Lord, Jesus the Christ, the one who loves us first, the one who shows us mercy undeserved, the one who claims us as his own. For when we love our enemies, when we extend our hands and our hearts, when we forgive those who hurt us, when we give without expecting credit or anything else in return, when we resist the urge to retaliate, we are a loving force of the very best kind and we look like children of the Most High, which is exactly who we are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.