

Epiphany 7 C Sermon
Luke 7:27-38
February 20, 2021

“Easier Said Than Done”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your God is merciful.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

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We’ve heard these words of Jesus before, haven’t we? They are as ubiquitous to Jesus as, well, the manger, or the eucharist, or the cross

itself. Of all the words spoken by Jesus, these words, a continuation of the Sermon on the Plain we began last week, are the most likely to be quoted, the most likely to appear on posters in school houses, drilled into the brains of the young, and recited by parents, wagging a scolding finger in the face of an offending child. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It’s so basic. The words are so simple. The way they just fall out of our mouths makes them seem almost benign, unoriginal, common.

How many of you have a brother or sister? I have one of each. How many of you have ever gotten into a hitting match with a brother or sister? Yeah, me too. I *rarely* started it, but one good blow deserves another, right? “He started it!” I’d say to my mother. “That doesn’t make hitting him back right,” she’d say. Turn the other cheek, says Jesus. If someone takes your clothes, give them your underwear too, says Jesus. If someone takes away your stuff, don’t try to get it back, says Jesus. We know these words. No, we might not be able to quote them back exactly as Luke writes them, but most people, even nonreligious people, make references to turning the other cheek and treating others as we want to be treated. We know these words so well that they don’t shock us anymore. The truth is, these words from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain are among the most dangerous—if not *the* most dangerous words in all of scripture for two reasons. Here’s why.

Firstly, these words are *the* most dangerous words in all of scripture because, of everything in the Bible, these words are the ones we might actually take literally—that is, as we hear them.

We hear, “turn the other cheek,” and I wonder, how many bullied kids and battered women and systemically oppressed people groups hear these words as an admonition to keep taking abuse? We hear, “if someone takes the coat off your back, give them your shirt too,” and I wonder how many impoverished elderly folks, and duped do-gooders have lost everything because they took these words to heart?

Let me be very clear, Jesus IS NOT admonishing his hearers to take abuse lying down or to actively give or passively be drained until there are no

resources left to live on. That is not his idea of godly living. That is not his idea of abundant life. And yet, these words are *the* most dangerous words in scripture because we take them literally and they end up justifying all sorts of abuse.

Secondly, these words are *the* most dangerous words in all of scripture because, of everything in the Bible, these words are the ones we might actually take seriously—that is, as Jesus intended. If we take them seriously, as Jesus intended, the admonition to turn the other cheek becomes an act of resistance. In the ancient world, any beating would have been done with the right hand, as the left was reserved for toilet tasks. Jesus was speaking to the oppressed. Any blow they would have received would have been a back handed blow to the left cheek. An oppressor never struck an inferior with the palm of their hand—that sort of fighting occurred only among social equals. What Jesus was saying is that if someone backhands you on your left cheek, turn and make them slap or strike you on your right cheek as an equal. This was an act of resistance to oppression.

Similarly, the admonition to give not your coat, but your shirt as well, is an act of resistance. In the ancient world, a person's coat could be taken in partial payment of a debt, leaving a poor person to sleep outside or in a barn with not even a coat to keep warm. Jesus was speaking to the oppressed. They had lost coats before. What Jesus was saying is that if someone sues you for your coat, give them the rest of your garments too. "Strip naked and expose what the system is really doing to you." This too was an act of resistance to oppression.

These words from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain are among the most dangerous—if not *the* most dangerous words in all of scripture because when taken literally they reinforce a status quo of oppression, abuse, and exploitation and when taken seriously, as Jesus intended, they expose, and defy, and contest the very injustice upon which the status quo relies to survive.

“Jesus is not telling people to remain victims but to find new ways of resisting evil. ‘Love your enemies,’ Jesus said, ‘do good to those who hate you.’ This is the ethic that moved Martin Luther King, Jr., to kneel down with many brothers and sisters before water hoses and snarling police dogs. Many people thought he was crazy. ‘Only violence can fight violence,’ they told him. But the authorities and the oppressors didn’t know what to do with this kind of resistance. They knew the power of violence; they knew the powerlessness of victims who knew their place, but this was something they hadn’t seen before: victims who refused to be victims, victims who refused to fight back with violence, victims who claimed their place and reshaped the battle completely.”¹

Before Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated for Jesus-inspired resistance during the American Civil Rights Movement, Mahatma Gandhi became its champion in his native India. The Hindu leader of the independence movement inspired the people of India to fight for independence from Great Britain and to, in his words, “stagger humanity without shedding a drop of blood,” by following the example of “Gentle Jesus, the greatest passive resister the world has seen.”²

Today, in the polarized scene of the American politics, as racial tensions and economic inequity tear at the thin fabric that knits us together as a people, as fear dupes us into seeing enemies in the faces of friends, neighbors, and outsiders, Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Plain confront us once again. If we want to challenge injustice, overturn the status quo, and change the world, Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If your oppressor strikes you, turn the other cheek and make them see you as an equal. If your oppressor takes your coat, strip naked and expose their injustice.”

¹ Barbara Lundblad. “Simple, Yet Not So Simple,” Day1.org, February 18, 2021, http://day1.org/642-simple_yet_not_so_simple.

² Harris Wofford. “Imitation of Christ? The World’s most famous Hindu became the greatest exemplar Of the Sermon on the Mount,” Mkgandhi.org, <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/harriswofford.htm>.

Jesus never encouraged his listeners to remain the victim. He never encouraged his listeners to switch teams and play for the oppressor. He never encouraged his listeners to resort to violence, or slander, or under the table politics, or shady dealings of any kind. He empowered his listeners to be change agents and he empowers us for that work today.

So, how do we do it? Jesus says that we should start with mercy. “God is kind,” he says, “to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your God is merciful.” Jesus teaches us to resist injustice and oppression, but never to stoop to the level of the oppressor. Mercy, compassion, love—these are what keep victims from becoming victimizers. Jesus calls us to confront all evil that denies the abundant life of the Realm of Heaven to any of the least of these. But to do so with mercy, compassion, and love, because the goal is never one of victory over another, but rather, the goal is flourishing for all—no exceptions.

No matter how right we feel and how wrong we feel someone else is, it’s not enough to long for and work for their downfall. We are called to work for the flourishing of all.

This week and always, Jesus calls us to: “Love our enemies, to bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us.” And he also calls us to resist, “to turn the other cheek that we might be acknowledged as equals; to give our undergarments as well that injustice might be exposed; to give freely; to do to others as we would have them do to us; and above all, to be merciful, as God is merciful.” May it be so with us. Amen.