

Pray for your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others.

Three distinct commands, but actions that are so interrelated that they cannot stand in isolation from one another. They are directives we've heard all our lives. And when we hear them, we may think of heroes of the Christian faith like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu. But despite the clear simplicity of these actions, despite their underlying truth about the inherent dignity of every human being, despite knowing the transformative power they wield, one might wonder if you must be a hero of the Christian faith in order to live them out day in and day out?

For me, these last two weeks have been filled with one example after another of (praying for one's enemies) those I know have sought reconciliation as the direct result of prayerful reflection and introspection; of (turning the other cheek) conscious choices to resist the fight/flight responses of aggression or passivity in the face of injustice but rather choose a third way of subversive grace; and of (doing unto others) ordinary people doing ordinary kindnesses for no reason other than because they should and because they can.

This portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain is all about subversive grace. It's about deliberately making space for God's Spirit to settle over interactions that could otherwise diminish the integrity of a child of God or be destructive of relationship among God's people. Let me go in reverse order of how Jesus presents them to explain:

The Golden Rule says do to others as you would have them do to you. Which is totally different from our culture's unspoken proverb of reactivity and vindictiveness that seems to read 'do to others as you perceive they've done to you.' It's the difference between making space

on the highway and inviting a car to change lanes in front of you in heavy traffic and yelling, making hand gestures and tailgating someone who has cut you off. Jesus does not advocate for an ‘eye for an eye’ retributive sort of justice, but rather asks us to consider genuine, selfless offerings of grace and understanding, compassion and empathy as a response to others’ selfishness, insecurity, or anxiety.

I’d like to point out that I’m not suggesting that it’s ever okay to take abuse. Abuse in any form is never okay, and should you need a safe person to go to, Father Furman and I both are here for you.

Jesus’ hearers 2000 years ago would not have heard words of submission or acquiescence in his metaphor about turning the other cheek. On the contrary, turning one’s cheek is an act of defiance: an act of deliberate resistance which undermines the illusion of power and control the aggressor seeks. A very different message is communicated when one reacts by turning one’s cheek rather than meeting violence with violence. In those brief moments before a second blow, during the time that the postures of both individuals shift, when the aggressor is forced to prepare to strike with the weaker fist and eye contact is made, he/she must acknowledge the opponent’s defiance and power before making that next move. In those moments, the aggressor is forced to make a moral choice.

Jesus is making bold statements about Godly power and who wields it when he tells the multitude gathered that they should pray for their enemies. When you consider that enemies by definition are only those who you perceive as a threat to you, when you recognize that your inherent power is not you’re your own, but rather comes from God, no one can truly be a threat to you. Our enemies are merely broken people, reflecting an imperfect, distorted image of the Holy, in need of redemption just like everybody else, including ourselves.

Zooming out and getting a birds’ eye view of the entire passage, Jesus here invites us into a relationship defined by prayer. In this passage,

Jesus is far less concerned about the conduct of the many than he is the spiritual motivations and conscious decisions of the individual believer. As such, prayer, as Jesus describes it here, changes not the one prayed for as much as the one doing the praying.

Pray for your enemy, he says. When you can do that with honesty and vulnerability, you may then discover the courage to turn the other cheek: claiming the beauty and truth and integrity of your personhood. Only after we can do that can we glimpse the created order in a way that God sees it ~ and the impulse to perform acts of life-giving kindness and compassion will overshadow impulses to react in ways that attempt to diminish others. The Golden Rule will be a natural byproduct of this prayer-inspired life because we will recognize the higher truth that we don't in fact have any enemies, we are all imperfect children of the living God.

Our life's journey is that of discipleship. Jesus preached this sermon some 2000 years ago to a group of trusted friends and anyone else who might listen, to equip the disciples to be the change God wanted to see in the world. And Jesus is preaching that same sermon to us again this morning. What do we feel most threatened by, and who or what embodies that threat in our lives? We are being encouraged by Jesus to move to a spiritual place of prayer about those threats, and then on to claiming a subversive grace to face them, and ultimately into bold action to fully embrace all that life has to offer. What might that look like for you?

I will close with a portion of a sermon preached by The Reverend Tracey Lind in Pasadena, California that describes what that looks like for her. Mother Tracey is a newly retired Episcopal priest. About 2 years ago, she was diagnosed with her enemy: a rare form of dementia. As she and her wife are traveling this discipleship journey marked by cognitive decline together, they are blogging about their experiences both joy-filled and heart-breaking. Mother Tracey continues to preach

and teach in churches around the country about the lessons she is learning from her disease.

Here is an excerpt¹ from a sermon she preached last month that for me illustrates the three points of Jesus' sermon on the plain that we've been talking about:

Too often, people with dementia seem to just give up, thinking, "I can't do anything." Unfortunately, this attitude is reinforced by a world that approaches dementia from a deficit perspective – noting all that is lost and anticipating what is often called "the long goodbye."

I resist the urge to give up nearly every day.

Instead, I choose to approach dementia from an assets perspective. I'm going to do what I can do until I can't. And then I'll do something else. For instance, I'm not driving much these days, but I still ride my bike ... with great enthusiasm. And when I can no longer ride a two-wheel bike, I'll get a three-wheel bike, and when I can't do that, I am determined to have fun with a walker or wheelchair.

I've read about writers who lose their grasp of language and become potters, physicists who become pianists, and CEOs who become gardeners. As I've witnessed in so many people living with dementia, and now see in my own life, there are amazing opportunities to be had in this journey, if we are willing (and allowed) to claim them.

When Jesus went to a wedding in Cana, he turned water into wine. My journey with dementia is becoming like a bottle of fine wine.

¹ <https://www.traceylind.com/blog>, excerpts from a sermon preached on Jan. 27, 2019 at All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, CA by the Rev. Tracey Lind

While I would have never, ever wished for this diagnosis, in a strange way, I am profoundly grateful.

Dementia has opened up my world in ways beyond my imagination. It has helped me to see the preciousness and uncertainty of life. It has provided Emily and me with a new adventure in togetherness and introduced us to new friends all over the world. It has forced me to slow down. It has humbled me. Like the Dalai Lama refers to his exile, as “an opportunity to get closer to life” so is my dementia.

What if we all decided to receive whatever life has to offer as we do a bottle of fine wine, a bouquet of exquisite flowers, a jar of precious oil? A gift from God to get closer to life - the life that Jesus showed us. And what if we treated each other as precious gifts, recognizing that each one of us is a manifestation of God’s Spirit and an integral part of Christ’s Body? This would certainly be the good news and freedom that Jesus came to proclaim.