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Sermon: Luke 6:27-36
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
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I don't know about you, but I struggle with this text. I recognize that these are words attributed to Jesus, and that the Bible is our sacred text in the Church, and that its contents are inspired by God—but I must confess that every passage doesn't pull on my heart strings. Some passages, I have to sit with. They pinch me and poke me. Some even inflame me. Some, I just outright disagree with. With this particular unit, it's mainly the part about allowing yourself to be slapped and abused. It's that classic "turn the other cheek" imperative. There are a couple of reasons why I am bothered by this. One reason is that I don't think that anyone needs to be a doormat for Jesus. I don't think that anyone should feel that they need to accept being violated and abused in order to feel like they're being a good Christian or like they're being spiritual. I once read a quote that said something like: "Unconditional love does not mean unconditional tolerance,"¹ and I wholeheartedly agree. I don't think we need to hear a "shut up and take it so you can get into heaven" message, particularly given the fact that abuse can and has lurked unreported and unresolved for years in the Church and especially because the Church often finds itself ministering to society's marginalized and most vulnerable, i.e. people who've already suffered exceptional mistreatment.

The second reason that I wrestle with this text is because of how it has become a section in the handbook of the powerful. It has become a part of the oppressive entity's playbook, and the passive leanings of the text get used to put the oppressed in their prescribed social place. We may note that the Christian message as a whole was expressly and dominantly used in the colonial era for the purposes of making better slaves.² Among Anglicans during the colonial period, enslavers sought assurance that baptizing the Africans they'd enslaved would not change the power dynamics. They wanted assurance that the Gospel would not change anyone's physical condition or status. Ecclesiastical authority obliged, and so the Gospel became a message that kept the powerful in position and kept those serving servile.³ In more recent times: When we see major social uprisings or really any kind of inflamed resistance to injustice, we can easily predict that a powerful politician will present himself as the peacekeeper and will say something to effect of, "What would Martin Luther King do?" Dr. King's nonviolent stance becomes a tool in the hands of those who shrewdly wish to placate those who are justifiably angry and justifiably hostile. Bernice King, Dr. King's daughter offered, in a tweet, one of the

¹ JoyHappinessLoveFamily3, "Unconditional Love Is Not Unconditional Tolerance. Read That Again.," America's best pics & videos, March 25, 2021, <https://americasbestpics.com/picture/unconditional-love-is-not-unconditional-tolerance-read-that-again-ciGuZBjT8>.

² Harold T. Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 20, 22.

³ Lewis, *Yet with a Steady Beat...*, 20-21.

best responses I've heard to that tactic, warning the public to not act like everybody loved MLK, because, in 1967, a poll reflected that he was the most hated man in America. She said that those who now cite his words to deter justice, would and may hate the "authentic" MLK.⁴ And though I challenge King's resolve to "wear [our enemies] down with our capacity to suffer,"⁵ I also understand that King's message as a whole was more complex. As a visionary, prophetic leader, King recognized towards the end of his life that even the lofty goal of integration might very well have compromising drawbacks for the Black community. Harry Belafonte reflected that MLK wondered if he was indeed integrating his people "into a burning house..."⁶ Likewise, the Gospel message is complicated and is much less understood—and can even be distorted—when interpreted at face value.

A surface reading of this text does injustice to it. Also, it's critical to go into this passage with both the heart and the mind harmoniously engaged. Much of Dr. King's theology around loving your enemies helps us to do just that. First: the love of which this passage speaks is not necessarily a buddy buddy love. It's not a love that requires that we like or condone the other person's actions. It's also not specifically referring to the love of a sibling or the love of a romantic partner. This is agape love.⁷ This is the universal love that doesn't require the bonds of friendship.⁸ King explains that this love does not mean ignoring what's been done in the past.⁹ And the late Bell Hooks adds that compassion and forgiveness, (which are elements of love), invite us to hold people accountable for wrongdoing while also seeing their humanity enough to hold space for their transformation.¹⁰ This agape love means that, while not overlooking the wrongdoing, we continue also to affirm that all are created in God's image and so all are essentially good. This agape love is like the love of a gracious parent. The loving parent may recognize the child's poor decisions, and yet they will see the best in their child. They will see their innocence, their smile, their laughter, their open heartedness, even through jail bars, even at the electric chair. While every loving parent may not use the language of "created in God's image" to characterize their child, I think that loving parents instinctively jump to the essence of that conclusion, which is that wherever we are, whatever we're doing, however we choose to show up in this moment, the God seed remains in us, and so we are still infinitely loved and also infinitely capable of showing love. We may not act our best, but we are still capable of being our best. The agape love sees the best in us and it calls that out of us. It's no wonder that Jesus follows this monologue with another classic imperative to remove the log from your own eye

⁴ Bernice King, Twitter Post, Jan. 18, 202, 3:49PM, <https://twitter.com/berniceking/status/1351089397584846849>.

⁵ King, Martin Luther. "Loving Your Enemies." Essay. In *Strength to Love*, 51. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981.

⁶ AUTODIDACT 17. "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: 'I Fear I Am Integrating My People into a Burning House.'" *The New York Amsterdam News*. January 12, 2017.

<https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2017/01/12/dr-martin-luther-king-jr-i-fear-i-am-integrating-m/>.

⁷ "Luke 6." Luke 6 . Interlinear Bible. Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/luke/6.htm>.

⁸ Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

⁹ King, Martin Luther. "Loving Your Enemies." Essay. In *Strength to Love*, 44. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981.

¹⁰ Horton, Adrian. "A Life in Quotes: Bell Hooks." *The Guardian*. December 15, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/dec/15/bell-hooks-best-quotes-feminism-race>.

before trying to fix other people,¹¹ because if we want to get smug about being called to show grace to people, we're to remember that God has shown grace to us. We haven't always been on our best behavior. We haven't always been justice warriors and so woke and moral and knowing what's what. God has loved us through our own messiness and ignorance. —Recently, at a Reparations Sunday event, Danita Roundtree Green, co-head of Coming to the Table RVA, noted even that sometimes, we as Black people will want to approach race conversations with the stance that everything is White people's fault. But as we begin to delve deeper and contemplate more, the conversation can become more humbling. I recall her ending that thought with the reminder that we will not be able to make substantial headway in race relations until we begin to acknowledge our own responsibility in circumstances—however small, however internalized that responsibility may be. And on this note, it's fitting that our Genesis reading of Joseph's brothers selling him into enslavement alludes to this tension in the narrative of oppression¹². There are degrees of complicity that sustain oppressive systems and actions. Sometimes that complicity comes in the form of outright betrayal. In the case of numerous uprisings and attempted uprisings among the enslaved, the plots crumbled often because another enslaved person betrayed the liberation efforts. Sometimes it was for selfish gain, like for money—but sometimes it was for more reasonable gain, for instance, for their freedom.¹³ But look at the cost laid on others. This is where Jesus's idea that God is kind even to the wicked really applies.¹⁴ We may think that the enemy is only outside of our camp—but the greater enemy often comes from within the fold, and even more specifically, within ourselves. So...be merciful, bc we may need that mercy for ourselves more than we realize.

Secondly, we may note that Jesus isn't saying that we are to give up and just get beat up to be closer to God. If we frame our Gospel lesson in the larger context of the Gospel of Luke, we'll see that the Gospel writer voices a great concern for the socially disadvantaged. We find an illustration of this in the Song of Mary right at the beginning of Luke's gospel.¹⁵ The Song of Mary is one of the biggest fists in the air to empire and oppression in the Bible, and it helps to establish Luke's emphasis on those in poverty, those less honored in society, those who are casted down...Everything that Jesus is calling followers to do in today's Gospel is challenging us to create a radical space that stands in juxtaposition to the ways of the dominant culture.¹⁶ In Jesus's time, Rome had the "Pax Romana," or what's translated in English as "Roman Peace"—but this wasn't true peace. It was an imposed hush.¹⁷ It was the peace of a household

¹¹ Lk 6: 37-42.

¹² Gen 37: 17b-20.

¹³ Holloway, Joseph E. "Slave Insurrections in the United States: An Overview." The Slave Rebellion Website. The Slave Rebellion Website, 2010. <http://slaverebellion.info/index.php?page=united-states-insurrections>.

¹⁴ Lk 6:35

¹⁵ Lk 1: 46-55

¹⁶ John T. Carroll, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). See Carroll's discussion of a "third space" in relation to The Gospel of Luke.

¹⁷ Segovia, Fernando F., and R. S. Sugirtharajah. *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2009.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/upsce-ebooks/reader.action?docID=742454>, 374.

dominated by abuse, where violence is used to shut people up and keep the situation under control. Military might was used to police the Roman provinces into submission. Sort of like today: when folks get too loud in the streets, civil authorities call out the National Guard on them, open the tear gas on them, throw them in jail for petty offenses. And that's supposed to be keeping the peace. That's supposed to be maintaining social order. But Jesus was saying that we don't need to use violence to bring about peace. We can get creative in our resistance strategies. We can level up. If you take my cloak from me, I'll give you my tunic—which would've been an undergarment in those days. That way, when I'm standing in the street naked, the community will view your actions with disdain for placing me in a position to be socially shamed.¹⁸ If you smack me on my right cheek, I'll offer you my left,¹⁹ which, again, in that socio-cultural context, would dare you to slap me as your equal. Jesus is saying: I will stand in my inherent equality and dignity before others, and because I am so bold in asserting who I know myself to be in the eyes of God, it will ultimately demand respect.²⁰ See, our Gospel's references are coded to make sense for the people of that time living under the dominance of the Roman empire, where a Roman soldier could seek to humiliate a subject publicly and have the law on his side. Jesus was giving ways to counteract this culture without placing his followers in a position to be violently wiped out under the empire's force.²¹ Likewise, it was no small gesture when Black men walked southern sidewalks holding signs that read, "I am a man," because they lived in a culture where it was acceptable for whites to call Black men boys; it was—and still is—acceptable to publicly humiliate Black people for even relatively minor acts of resistance.

Jesus's ability to overcome the opposition with love still holds today. We still need the humility love requires to not burnout while calling the world to justice. We still need the creativity love requires, because many of us still belong to marginalized groups that are vastly outnumbered in the face of power. Plus, we want to avoid becoming the problem while defusing the problem. We still need the boldness love requires, because we need to be able to challenge issues without attacking and making the situation worse for everyone involved. For example, I'd like for us to address the question of why Diocesan staff has struggled so long to reflect the diversity we say we seek as a Church. I'd like for us to address the question of why we've never had a Black Bishop, an Indigenous bishop, or any Bishop of color in the Diocese of Virginia. I'd like for us to address the classism embedded in the Church. I'd like for us to address why The Episcopal Church does not draw more Black people in the U.S. I'd like for us to go there, but it's that agape love that would make that inquiry and those conversations joyful.

It's that love that says, "I don't have all the answers, but I'm committed to sitting with you in the questions." It's that love that says, "I don't need to be your friend, but I'll respect you through

¹⁸ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 103-106.

¹⁹ See Matt 5:39 for the right/left specification.

²⁰ Wink, *The Powers That Be...*, 101-103.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106-111.

our process.” It’s that love that says: “We’re not where we’re going, but we’re gonna get there.” “It’s that love that says, I may be upset with you right now, and for good reason, but I am committed to being a reflection of the Most High, and so I choose to see the best in you.” It’s that love, love, love that says: I’m not so sure about that scripture, but I know God’s got something in it for us.” It’s this love that surpasses understanding and transcends circumstances, and will carry us through, and bring us out if we choose its embrace.

To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.