

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY — PSALM 37, LUKE 6:27-38

There is great power in proclaiming aspirational words - speaking to what shall be but isn't yet. This is an example that is set clearly in the scriptures from today and yet, I think, it is one of the most misunderstood things about the Christian faith by the outside world. And, I believe, also misunderstood sometimes by us, who live inside of it. Many well-intentioned leaders trip over the theological implications of what it means to proclaim the good news of Jesus and the world that *will* come while reflecting honestly on the world that is. So, in an effort to be pastoral and loving toward our people, we hedge our bets and either skimp on the details of evil or we skimp on risky, prophetic speech that reflects God's promises to us. We cannot deny the very real and devastating impacts of evil. Evil ruptures lives. It sows as its seed; trauma, discord, oppression, apathy, and hatred. It sieges upon the heart freezes the mind with fear. It convinces us that we are right to despise those who harm us. And, I think, it is utterly irresponsible for one who is called to open up their mouth with a Word from the Holy not to name what is antithetical to God's goodness. So, as a community, it is vital that we hold reality and aspiration in balance, working as one to avoid altogether people feeling like their current struggles are overlooked by aspirational claims. This is a dance that requires deftness. We won't always get it right. And by God's good grace, we need not. We need only to try. In our efforts, we will be carried by ancestors, saints, the great cloud of witnesses, and our advocate, the Holy Spirit. All of whom will celebrate our willingness. There is a multiplicity of ways in which we endeavour to hold this balance, but first among them is to tell the truth of God's vision for our lives and our world, acknowledging, though we may glimpse its grace and wonder, we are still in a time of "not yet". One day soon, Church, but not yet.

For the wicked shall be cut off, but not yet. The meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity, but not yet. One day soon, but not yet. And in the meantime, how do we resist faithfully the tyranny of evil that wears many faces? Unmitigated predatory global capitalism, white supremacy, the rise of authoritarian ideologies worldwide, homophobia/transphobia, misogyny, etc. In a continuation of Jesus' teachings from "a level place", the Lukan gospel tells us just how we might resist. And building upon what we learned in last week's gospel lesson, we remember that the level place is a place well-acquainted with corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, hunger, annihilation, misery and mourning. Remember, the level place is where all prophets, from all times, must stand to speak of God's healing. The deep compassion for humanity cultivated upon the level places in this world propels the prophet to speak of Love that eclipses all evil. Love cultivated amongst oppression and death and spiritual decay is not anaemic, squishy love at all. It is love that has ventured deep into the enigmatic heart of the Divine Mystery and is capable of holding and speaking a vision to life.

Jesus instructs us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse our name, to pray for our abusers. Friends, I assure you that intellectual assent alone cannot accomplish this. It doesn't make sense. It makes even less sense if you are a person who, like Indigenous people, must live and move and have your being on land that was stolen. As the descendants of those who did the stealing who still benefit from the systems put in place to maintain that power, all while your people are disproportionately imprisoned, murdered and missing, and access to earthly justice is limited. So too, is the sense lacking for Black people of the diaspora who cannot pinpoint where our family tree began because it was hacked down, bloodied, and stolen. So too, for the poor and working-class, and those who are abused in intimate relationships or by family members. It just doesn't make sense. Jesus' instructions are not wrong, but without understanding the heart of God, it is easy for trauma to be ignored and mocked by twisting the words of the Prince of Peace into a mantra that excuses accountability. This lesson requires a deep opening of our heartspace...

It might surprise you to know that, in fact, with Jesus' instruction to "turn the other cheek", Jesus is not asking us to be subservient, but rather, he is teaching us one way to resist abuse non-violently. At the time of Jesus, those who struck you on your cheek were either masters or soldiers. Striking the cheek was the way a master disciplined an enslaved person or servant; the way he asserted his authority; the way he put you back in line. And at the time of Jesus, there was a proper way to do this. One would stand facing their master, and he would strike the right cheek with the back of his right hand. Because this was the proper way to hit the cheek, doing it any other way would be a loss of dignity and social standing for the master. The blow was about asserting status and power over the other. This is not about random violence or fighting among friends or enemies. It is about rank, privilege and power.

So imagine what happens if, after having been struck on the right cheek, one was to stand there and silently turn your head to offer the left cheek? If you act this out, you'll see that it is impossible to strike the left cheek with the back of the right hand.

Standing there offering the left cheek becomes an act of resistance. The master is unable to discipline in the accepted fashion - his powerlessness is exposed for all to see - and with that, he is shamed and dishonoured. And more importantly, the subservient has exposed the reality that master and slave are not in right relationship reflective of the Good News. As African-American mystic and theologian Howard Thurman says it, "In the presence of an overwhelming sincerity on the part of the disinherited, the dominant are caught with no defense...they are

thrown back on themselves...their experience of power has no meaning aside from the other-than-self reference which sustains it. If the position of ascendancy is not acknowledged by those against whom the ascendancy is exercised, then it falls flat.”

I would take this further by using a postmodern understanding of power that says that if those who are welcomed into the club of power-over eschew the invitation and they too “offer the left cheek” then the very nature of how we culturally define power can begin to be rightly challenged. I think this is necessary because history has shown us that actively oppressed people cannot rely upon the oppressor’s shame or empathy as a means to liberation. Power itself must be redefined and carefully evaluated. It is my belief that Jesus’ demonstration of power-with reigns far superior to any notion of power-over.

Today, we see the rise of dangerous ideologies, perhaps once thought to have been defeated. Neo-fascism relies upon a binary understanding of relationship, like the master/slave, wicked/righteous binary we encounter in today’s scripture. The rhetoric of “us” vs “them” is central in allowing this ideology to fester. As long as even so-called “good people” buy into it, it remains viable rhetoric for use by anyone. Neo-fascism relies on spinning tales about a romanticised, fictional past in which things were markedly better. It is worth asking when we hear these narratives, “better for whom?” I submit to you all if one’s definition of freedom is predicated upon the denial of freedom for others, then it must be said that it is not freedom that is being discussed but rather privilege. And privilege unchecked and unmitigated easily becomes entitlement. Love, the kind of agape love that we are called to as Christian people, can never become entangled and confused with such a definition of liberation. Such a definition of Christianity is antichrist. And still, while we must be firm in our rejection of such false definitions of liberty, we are still called to love our enemies. We are called to agape.

This is no anaemic love! Agape calls us to be whole-hearted, unreserved, and unconditional in our desire for the well-being of the other. Nothing is held back. There is no hesitation. There is no calculation of costs and benefits. No expectation of receiving anything in return. No payoffs. Only total desiring of the well-being of the other for their own good, so that they can stand in right relations with self, others, and the Holy. We do not have to like, dine with, or braid our enemies hair. Instead we must speak and act against what they stand for if indeed it is counter to freedom that includes all people. And when we offer agape to our enemies, the ways in which we express our dislike and opposition will always also express our total desire for their well-being and their reconciliation to the Mother of us all. Our agape will express our total desire to be in the relationship with them that *God desires*.

The ancient Greeks had two words for time: chronos, meaning chronological or sequential time, and kairos, which meant 'the right, critical, or opportune moment'. Kairos is used 86 times in the bible, often with a meaning that suggests a conversion from people is required. Our conversion to God's desires over our own is inextricably linked to seizing upon a critical moment...

And so I say to you, Church, if this word today exists only in chronos, then let us be thankful to the Holy Spirit for it. Thankful that our efforts upon hearing it may begin to shape the new earth to come, perhaps thousands of years from now, where peace and justice reign. But if, as Jesus promised, the Word is alive and enfleshed now, then this is kairos, and the Word, the aspirational vision for this community and for the world, is fulfilled upon our hearing. Our conversion meets Divine right timing, and a new earth is no longer not yet, but right now.