

Sermon for 7 Epiphany—Outrageous!
St John's, Gloucester
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Today's Gospel lesson is outrageous! I dare you to read this and not find something offensive. So let's do a show of hands on which things really bug you, which things you find outrageous or like, I would never do that! Be honest, now.

Here we go: Love your enemies. Impossible? Annoying? How about: do good to those who hate you? bless those who curse you? pray for those who abuse you? If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also? From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt? Give to EVERYONE who begs from you? If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again?? How about this one: God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked? God is outrageous; Jesus asks outrageous things of his disciples.

So every single one of us found this hard; I'm not sure who can actually stomach this passage.

There are two different things going on here. One is relationships to those above us; one is relationships to those below us. And Jesus offends us on both accounts!

First, over us. Bible scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh ([Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels](#)) give this interpretation of the first part of the passage. They point out that the ones striking the right cheek would be masters disciplining workers or Roman soldiers asserting their power over Jews, the occupied people. The people taking your cloak would be Roman soldiers harassing or terrorizing the Jews. So these sentences are about reacting to people who hold power over you, even or especially unjust power. One kind of enemy. To discipline those under you, it was common to strike the person on the right cheek with the back of your right hand. It showed who was in charge, who had power. Jesus says, "offer the other cheek." In the face of unequal power, even abusive power, don't retaliate. But resist. Now you change the expected dynamic. The master strikes, the worker accepts her place, and the social order continues. But offering the other cheek means, I am a human, a strong person, worthy of respect. Look at me and decide. Will you see me as a person? Will you step out of your role and act as a human? Or will you up the violence and hit me with your open palm?

It is the same dynamic with the cloak and tunic (the equivalent to us of a coat and shirt or dress). Taking someone's cloak and not giving it back was forbidden in Jewish law, because it left a person open to the cold and the elements. Soldiers would use this to keep Jews in their place or terrorize them. Jesus says, "If anyone takes your cloak, give them your tunic also." If you give them your tunic, now you're naked. It shows up the power imbalance and your humanity—bear naked flesh—and it offers them a chance to react, not as part of the machine, but as a human. They may start seeing the person they are oppressing or mistreating as a human being, not a foe. But maybe not. Still, the disciple who acts this way offers a different relationship.

The other injunctions stem from different relationships—one we have with people who are "beneath" us, when we have more power. "Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." "Lend expecting no return." "Be merciful." These are all about being in the power position or one-up position. Think about it: there is no moral dilemma when you have nothing and someone begs from you. You just say, "I'd love to help,

but I'm in the same boat.” No, the problem is when we have stuff—we have money or goods or intangibles that we think are ours and we earned and I shouldn't have to share with THOSE PEOPLE. We put ourselves above others. And we set up a moral calculus about whether this person or that group is worthy of help or donations or whatnot. And we get very self-righteous and protective, or we may share a little, occasionally, but not in the outrageous complete way that Jesus is asking.

Jesus doesn't buy it. I think he first is calling into question what is “ours” and what is “theirs” and the whole “earning it, deserving it” mentality. You say you earned it. But did you really? It's a known fact that all of us non-native people took over, ie stole, land from native peoples. It's a fact that much of our white wealth—even in the North—comes from slave trading and redlining and all kinds of discriminatory practices against Blacks. It's a fact that middle and upper class white people have all kinds of advantages—access to education, houses, jobs, wealth, healthcare—that poorer people and people of color don't have. Did you earn being white? Did you earn being male? Are you smart? Do you have special talents or abilities? Were you born healthy? Did you earn those? Of course not!

Saying “give to those who beg” and “let people who take your stuff have it” and “lend without expecting anything in return” is calling us to equal relationship with those who have less power or less money or less education than we do. It's about refraining from judging them as worthy or not worthy. Jesus says, “Just see them as human and respond to them as humans.” And it is also an invitation to reflect on our brokenness. “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” We probably think Jesus is referring to “those wicked people,” because of course we're good people. But that means us, too. We're often ungrateful, and sometimes do bad things. God is kind to all, even us! The truth is, all of us are a mix, some good, some wicked, some ungrateful.

It's easier to give to homeless people if you've been homeless. It's easier to be a sponsor to someone in recovery, if you've gone through recovery. It's a lot harder to do those things if you live a privileged, cushy life and have never faced your own demons.

Jesus doesn't let anyone off the hook. Not if you've been hurt or attacked or oppressed. Not if you are the oppressor. Not if you are the one with money or power. It's hard stuff that we don't want to hear or want to explain away as not applying to us. But he wants us—his disciples—to respond to other humans AS HUMANS—equal before God, equally worthy of love, mercy, forgiveness. God is outrageous, offering these things to EVERYONE.

In 2013, I was wounded by the Church and fled my calling as priest. By 2017, I started reconnecting to Church, feeling redirected, perhaps, to come back into ministry. But two things became apparent. One was that I was really tired, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, especially after unemployment and my father's death. A chance encounter helped me realize that I needed to go on retreat for a chunk of time.

I was pretty broke by then, so I looked for a retreat house that would allow me to worship with them AND would let me work for room and board. I found a Benedictine Abbey in New Mexico where I would work and rest and pray for a month. The second thing that became really apparent was that I was still hauling around a bunch of resentment towards about 4 people who had really hurt me. One was my former landlord's girlfriend. Two were church leaders. One was a former boss.

My first week on retreat, I settled in, spent a lot of time in prayer and silence and reading. Sleeping. Resting. I went to almost all of the masses and morning, evening, and noon prayer services. I also meditated by the river. The second week, I was ready to work on forgiving the people who hurt me.

I went to morning prayer and mass. And this was the reading: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Oh. I knew those words were for me. But how could I possibly do this? These people had hurt me, changed my life in ways that I hadn’t wanted.

I wrote down these words in my journal. I knew they were to be my guide. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” I started with one person to forgive: the woman who had forced me to leave the basement apartment I rented in the house where she and the landlord lived. I decided to write a letter to her. Not one that I would send. But a letter. I did some praying. I started. I wrote about how hurt I had been, how hard she had made my life there before they kicked me out, how I had no stable housing now. Love your enemies, pray for those who abuse you, bless those who curse you. Something changed in my writing. I remembered how much I had liked her in the beginning, how we were similar in many ways, how she had included me in her circle for awhile. How hard her life had been, especially when her father had died recently. How she wasn’t a bad person at all. And I started feeling compassion for her. Seeing her as equal, glorious and flawed, just like me. And by the end of the letter, I was able to wish good for her and blessing on her and to pray for her.

I went through the same process the next day with two church people who had also caused me great pain and harm, people that I always considered good men, just in a bad situation who made bad decisions. And the same transformation happened. But then came the really hard one. The boss who fired me, a man who I really detested. He treated all the employees badly, had questionable morals, didn’t treat his wife well, possibly mishandled the organization’s money. More than half the staff turned over in the one year I was there. He made up reasons to fire me, reasons that were ridiculous. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Yeah right. So I wrote him a letter. There were about three pages of telling him what an awful person he was, with lots of profanity and anger about what he had done to me. That was about all I could do. The next day I picked it up again. How could I possibly see this person who had had power-over-me, who had abused that power, as an equal, as a beloved child of God?

There was a shift. Not a huge shift or complete shift. Just a little shift. I thought about his big house and big cars and rich lifestyle. I thought about how empty his life must be; about how he probably didn’t have any real friends; about how afraid he must be, especially if he were misusing money or running the organization into the ground. I started writing prayers for him, that he might fail. Not as punishment, but as opening to grace.

That he might get to a place of needing to change, wanting to know real love, being able to contribute positively to life. That where he was couldn’t be good for him. And I was able to truly pray for him and wish him good and asking blessing for his life. It was different than for the others, but it was what came, and it felt genuine and grace-filled.

At the end of this week, I constructed little rafts out of twigs and flowers. I asked another retreatant to accompany me in my ritual of forgiveness. We went down to the river on the monastery property. I read each letter out loud, said a prayer, and launched each raft down the river to let go of my resentment, to forgive. That night a huge rainstorm came to make sure that the rafts were gone, gone, gone.

Jesus makes outrageous demands. God is outrageous. But we are all glorious people, we are all broken people. We need that mercy and kindness and forgiveness of God. And we need to be able to give that to others, over us and under us. Because we are all equal before God. AMEN.