

“Illuminating Identity: When Things Get Hard”

*A sermon preached on Luke 6:27-38 by Emily Hull McGee
on February 24, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

One of the accounts I follow on Twitter is a lighthearted and humorous take on ministry by a fellow minister. (We have to laugh at ourselves every now and again, you know?!) I could tell he was preaching through the lectionary as well when I noticed a question pop up on the account a few days ago, which said: "Quick question, does 'love your enemies' count on Twitter? Surely, Jesus never anticipated Twitter when he said that, right?" Hundreds of responses poured in, one of which said what I imagine the lot of us modern minister-types were thinking: "Love your enemies*... *terms and conditions may apply."¹

II.

I admit, that's sometimes the way I'd like to interpret our gospel text today, that it be taken with the asterisk firmly in place. You remember from last Sunday, that Luke's Jesus has come not onto the mountain, but to the level place, where he is sharing a sermon with the disciples and the crowds. "But I say to you that listen," Jesus said, knowing he'd need to make such a caveat, "love your enemies, 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 one; if anyone takes your coat, don't withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs. If anyone takes away your stuff, don't ask for them back."

¹ Status and exchange from Unvirtuous Abbey, February 24, 2019: <https://twitter.com/UnvirtuousAbbey/status/1099536702098550784>.

You could just imagine the state of the crowds — surely some had to be reacting in horror, some aghast, some disgusted. Love your *enemies*? Bless and pray for those who curse and harm you? *Are you crazy?* Whatever the first century version of an asterisk was, I bet there had to have been some in the crowd looking for it.

And then Jesus shared the line we now refer to as ‘the Golden Rule’ — ‘do to others as you would have them do to you.’ That would have been a familiar exhortation to the crowds, one that the gospel writer Matthew also employed, and one that was shared in some form or fashion outside of their religious tradition with philosophers like Homer, Philo, Seneca, and others.² With the advantage of 2000 years of development and interpretation through which to view that command, we hear into it what we’re listening for: treat others the way you want to be treated, if you don’t want to experience meanness or violence, don’t dole it out. But Jesus presses further, explaining what he means by “do unto others” in ways that are subversive, even radical.

If you love those who love you, what credit — or in the original Greek, what grace is that to you? If you do good to those who are good to you, what credit, what grace is that to you? If you give to those who give to you, what credit, what grace is that to you? Anyone can do that — even sinners love those who love them, are good to those who are good to them, share with those who share with them. *But you are to love your enemies, do good, and give expecting nothing in return.* Somehow I’m not sure that’s what people had in mind when they thought of doing unto others...

² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p90.

Because what Jesus understood plainly is that our sense of God's activity in our lives is thrown into sharp relief when things get hard. Anyone can follow God's teachings when life is easy, he seems to say, but what about when life is so challenging, when you are facing those who have hated your or worked against your well-being. What do you do then? For Jesus knows what we sometimes fail to acknowledge that the choices we make when things get hard says much about who we are.

One writer says that, "When the teachings of the Sermon on the Plain are not grounded in the disciple's identity as God's child, they become an onerous list of ethical demands that do not further justice and wholeness. [But] when the disciple understands his actions as flowing out of God's abundance, to which he belongs and which belongs to him, turning the other cheek becomes an act of resistance to evil that has the power to transform others and the world."³ Identity precedes ethics, not the other way around. When we know who God is, we understand more intimately the richness of God's amazing grace and God's mercy that is new every morning. When we know who and whose we are, we live and move and have our being holding fast to that truth. And most often, this is most powerfully experienced when things get hard.

III.

Friends, I don't have to tell you that things are hard right now. I wrote about this in my newsletter post this week — life is so challenging for so many of us. From individual challenges to relationship struggles to worldwide suffering, we the people are collectively experiencing heartache and hardship

³ Susan E. Hylen, "Luke 6:27-38," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p384.

on a regular basis, such that it's causing more depression, more addiction, more division, more tearing of the social fabric that binds us together.

And into such a climate, we read again these old old words and situate them right here in 2019. For truly, can there be a more urgent call than to love our enemies in this fractured season of our humanity? Can there be a more clear need than doing good to those who hate us in a world where we'd sooner write them off, take them down, unfollow and unfriend? Can there be a more radical invitation than the intimacy of blessing and praying for those who hurt us in a culture that would rather distance ourselves from those who decry and demean? Even though we know that Jesus's words aren't encouraging us to be silent when there is injustice, abuse, and violence, we have to hear his exhortation and ask ourselves....

... if you love those who vote like you or value like you, those who think like you or tweet like you, those who look like you or love like you, where's the grace in that? If you do good to those whose decisions and priorities mirror yours, whose deeply-held convictions reflect your own, whose advantages meet your needs, where's the grace in that? If you share with those who share your skin color or your economic philosophy, those who share your parenting philosophy or your work ethic, those who share your loyalties or your DNA, where's the grace in that? Anyone can love those who love in return, anyone can do good to those who do good in return, anyone can share with those who share in return.

But what of us who are called to an identity of grace, an identity that points to the One in whose image we are created, the One who runs after the sheep gone astray or the child returning home with no less than full

celebration. For the one who was lost has now been found! Grace upon grace upon grace.

IV.

“An Experiment in Empathy,” the *New York Magazine* article was called, published in December 2016 to and about an America limping towards a new year still battered from the most divisive election in recent history. The story began by introducing the reader to Todd Underwood: a resident of Kansas City, founder and owner of the “social marketplace for the firearms community” called United Gun Group. Not long before the story began, United Gun Group and Todd as founder would gain instant notoriety as the ones who allowed George Zimmerman to sell on their portal the gun that Zimmerman had used to kill Trayvon Martin.

Todd was traveling to New York, where he didn't know it yet but would soon meet Carolyn Taft: a self-employed artist and mother of four living in Salt Lake City, who several years prior took her youngest daughter Kirsten to the mall to buy Valentine's Day cards. When a shooter opened fire that day, Kirsten was killed right in front of Carolyn, and Carolyn was shot so many times that she lived with debilitating pain that impacts every moment of the day.

The aforementioned experiment is what would draw these two unlikely folks together to New York, where sponsored by *New York Magazine*, a group called Narrative 4 gathered a dozen people from both sides of the gun debate to meet and hear deeply each other's stories. Each of the invitees had a personal experience with guns which had forever shaped their lives and opinions about them: victims of assault who were both bound and liberated

by a gun at the scene, a legislator and a judge, card-carrying members of the NRA, veterans and police officers, several who had lost children in mass shootings or accidental ones, a hunter, and a couple of teenagers who cut their teeth alongside gang members on the streets of the South Side of Chicago. And somehow, they had all agreed to come to New York and participate in this experiment of “radical empathy.”

Todd and Carolyn would soon meet and be paired up first to hear each other’s story. Todd would stand up vehemently for liberal gun laws and dismiss gun control advocates as ‘completely irrational.’ Carolyn would describe her tireless efforts of working for stricter gun laws so that those who should never have them in the first place couldn’t get them. They, like all the other pairs around them, would find that first day to be tough, each heading back to their hotels completely spent from the emotional complexity of the day.

Day two was even more challenging. Again the participants were paired up as they’d been the day before, but this time, they had to tell each other their personal story behind the stances, what (most often painful) incidents had happened in their lives to create such defined opinions about guns. Then each pair had to narrate those stories – but do so as if they were their partner.

Carolyn stood up and began what would be the most gripping 13 minutes of the weekend. “I’m Todd Underwood,” she said, “founder of United Gun Group, which is the company that sold the gun that shot Trayvon Martin.” A brief waver in her resolve passed quickly, for then she began to describe Todd’s abusive and manipulative father, who spent Todd’s childhood

kicking and beating him on a daily basis. She told about Todd's muscular dystrophy, about how his father exploited Todd's unsteadiness on his feet and waged power over him because of it. She recounted the time as a teenager, Todd's father got mad at him, balled up his fist, and punched him full force in the face. "And that was the last straw for me," Carolyn said as Todd, shaken by imagining the terror inflicted on a child by a parent. "I decided, *I will not be bullied, ever again.*" Now, guns help Todd to feel safe, they comfort him as he desires to protect his family. Carolyn concluded: "My name is Todd."

Todd took a breath, look down at his notes, and began. "My name is Carolyn," he said. "I am an artist. I was self-employed. I had my own company. What I was most proud of in my life was — " His voice cracked and suddenly, Todd couldn't speak. For a full, painful minute, the folks in the room waited quietly for Todd to regain the capacity to continue. Beside him, Carolyn comforted him with a pat. Todd then told of Carolyn's pride as a mother of two boys and two girls, of the love that filled their home, of Kirsten and the bright light of her life. The story turned, as he portrayed that fateful day in the mall, the loud bangs and shattered glass, the shooter she stared down, bullets raining upon herself and ending the life of her precious daughter. The tears on his face bore the anguish of the memory. "I complained to my daughter about her messy room at times," Todd said. "I would give anything to be able to have that messy room again. My name is Carolyn," he finished.

The reporter who told their story said this: "Nothing else that happened that weekend begins to compare to those 13 minutes, when Carolyn Tuft and Todd Underwood took possession of one another's

stories.... They became each other. And in that moment, the videographers were crying. The organizers, who have seen versions of this a hundred times before, were crying. No one in the room that day will ever forget what they saw. In that moment, the commonality of experience, the universality of human vulnerability, had been so obvious – and so breathtaking. Everyone in the room was separated not by a deep canyon but by a thin line.”⁴

IV.

You could call that thin line the string that weaves us together. Scott Hudgins sent me an article this week by *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks called “A Nation of Weavers”⁵ In it, Brooks begins by naming the hardship as he sees it – pain scrawled on the faces of the Todds and the Carolyns of this world and everyone in between. “These different kinds of pain share a common thread,” Brooks says, “[that is] our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, distrust, tribalism, shaming and strife.”

For in the face of such social isolation and fear, what we need, Brooks claims, are the Weavers, those people all around the country and the world who are weaving community and belonging at the most basic level. They’re the caregivers and the teachers, those who stay and those who are trusted,

⁴ I was first introduced to this remarkable story through the Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, Senior Minister of The Riverside Church, who shared it in her sermon called “The Hardest Commandment,” which can be found here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/talkwiththepreacher/2017/02/19/the-hardest-commandment/>. The original story, “An Experiment in Empathy,” from *New York Magazine* can be found here: <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/12/gun-violence-radical-empathy.html?gtm=top>m=top>. Dr. Butler then shared an opinion piece in *USA Today* about a chance meeting she had with Todd Underwood, underscoring the themes from the original story. It can be found here: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/06/23/liberal-pastor-conservative-gun-activist-we-have-to-keep-talking-amy-butler-column/103007558/>

⁵ David Brooks, “A Nation of Weavers,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/opinion/culture-compassion.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

those who are committed not just to radical empathy, but radical mutuality, of the 'love your enemies' kind. "I guess my ask is that you declare your own personal declaration of interdependence and decide to become a Weaver instead of a ripper," Brooks concludes. "Every time you assault and stereotype a person, you've ripped the social fabric. Every time you see that person deeply and make him or her feel known, you've woven it." To that, Jesus might add, every time you love beyond boundaries, do good, and share expecting nothing in return, you have bound up your identity with mine, full of grace and truth.

For when the social fabric fails, there are those to weave it back together. When agreement fails, there is empathy and the stories to take on as your own skin. When empathy fails, there is honesty about who and whose we all are. When honesty fails, there is grace upon grace upon grace. When grace fails, there is hope that sees beyond the current moment. When hope fails, there is love. And love... love does not come with terms and conditions, it does not have an asterisk. For love never fails.

In hard times and peaceful ones, may we live as if that were the truth!