

C Epiphany 7 2.20.22

Luke 6:26-38

Focus Statement: God's kingdom of reversal gives us the power to transform the world.

Last weekend I went on a long run with a friend. Eighteen miles over snowy ground gave us a LOT of time to talk, and we got to talking about her seventh-grade son's tennis lessons. Specifically, one of the other kids in her seventh-grade son's tennis lessons. This other kid was a year or two older than her's, a freshman in high school, but despite being older was the smallest kid in the tennis club. Being older and smaller gave him that small dog mentality, where he had to prove himself against every other kid in the program. To put it short, the other kid was kind of a bully. She was telling me about her son's struggles with this kid, and how she told him to respond. "Just ignore him, and when you can't, be polite to him," she said. "You don't have to like everyone, but I raised you to be polite, so you have to be polite. Plus," And this is where I think her parenting skills really notched up, "plus," she said, "then he's the jerk picking on the nice kid, and he'll look worse."

There's power in being nice. It's weird to talk about niceness as a power move, but it is. I think we can sometimes categorize niceness as weakness or being a push-over, but that's not it at all. Being nice, and firm in our niceness, can be incredibly powerful. Another story about niceness in youth sports before we get into the text. St. Phil played Climax-Scotts a last week, and we were just getting killed. Climax plays hard, and for whatever reason that night we could not match that level of physicality. We were in the locker room at halftime, trying to regroup, discussing their level of play and how we could match it, and one of our girls piped up, "I'm trying to guard number four, but she's just so nice." The other coaches and I looked at each other. "What do you mean she's nice?" "I mean she's really nice. Like,

we were down at the end of the court waiting for the ball to be inbounded, and she complimented me on how the last play had gone. I don't know how to guard someone so nice!" This seemed like a funny comment, we told her to guard her like she would any other, not as nice player. But I paid attention to this kid during the second half, and the girl was really nice. She played hard, don't get me wrong. She ran over our girls a few times trying to bring the ball up, she wrestled for loose balls, she boxed out, all the things. But she picked girls up when she knocked them down and, most noticeably, she was verbally complimentary of a good play, and you could tell from her expression and tone that the compliment was real and well-intentioned. And our girls, who in their own right are good sports, very good about helping people up after someone goes down, couldn't figure out how to interact with someone so genuinely kind. It was actually pretty funny.

What do these stories have to do with anything? Our Gospel reading for this morning is the next section of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Last week, we heard Jesus proclaim blessings and woes on very unlikely people, blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated and reviled, and woe to the rich, the full, the laughing, the well regarded. That scandalous intro was enough to turn many off. I mentioned even theologians so close to Jesus as the writer of the Gospel of Matthew tried to soften these words, make them easier for the average person to digest and connect to. But these words aren't easy, they aren't meant to be. This teaching of Jesus is about transforming how his followers moved through the world in order to transform the world.

And after reversing who was blessed and who needed to be alert, Jesus didn't go any easier in this next section. I love how it opens. "But I say to you that listen..." One of the commentaries I read hinted that the Greek syntax could be emphasizing the participle, letting us read this, "But I say to you that are still listening..." indicating that Jesus knew some folk had begun to tune him out after the first section. "But I say to you that are still listening, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who abuse you."

Love your enemies? Do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you? At first glance, this seems like the opposite of the kingdom of radical justice Jesus claimed to be ushering in. But what Jesus teaches us in this text is the difference between justice and retribution. Retribution is you get what you deserve, eye for eye, blow for blow, everything being distributed as it is earned. The problem with this model is, if we take it to its natural conclusion, to God's treatment of us, then we end up where Luther found himself, eternally in debt to a God whose justice he could never meet.

But God is not a God of retribution, God is a God of justice and mercy. A God whose justice is liberative, transformative, anchored in the resurrection promise that where we are is not where we will end up, for in the great reversal of the coming kingdom of God, the whole world will be upended for the goodness of all. And the way to reach that transformation is not violence, but niceness.

This passage, and the life of Jesus, also shows us that niceness is not weak. Niceness is not go along to get along. Niceness is not, whatever you want to do is fine, because I'm nice and

I don't want to hurt your feelings. Being nice, Jesus says, is a power move. Being nice is a declaration that I will not stoop to your level, but I will stand tall and be committed to both of our wellbeing's, even as you are only committed to your own. Being nice means seeing the common humanity, the imago dei, in everyone. It is standing up to evil, without letting that evil dictate how you respond. And, like my friend encouraged her seventh grader, it means playing the long game. It feels better in the moment to make the quick comment, take the quick hit, get that initial rush of victory. But all that ever really results in is the other person burrowing in further to their corner, holding tighter to their convictions, being more convinced of themselves.

Last Sunday I referenced the unlikely friendship between Derek Black, son of the prominent white supremacist Don Black, and orthodox Jew Matthew Stevenson. This is an amazing example of the power of niceness to overcome deep-seated ideology. Derek Black grew up filling immersed in white nationalism. By the age of ten, he had started his own white nationalist website, Stormfront for kids, to engage the next generation of white nationalists. When he started college, he was organizing national seminars of young people to teach the talking points of white supremacy and white nationalism. It was in college that he met Matthew Stevenson. Stevenson lived in the room below him and used to sing along when Black would play guitar. Stevenson had been hosting Shabbat dinners in his room, and knowing only a little bit of Black's background, decided to invite him to come, figuring that he'd never met anyone from the backgrounds he despised, and maybe meeting people would open his mind. Despite being an avowed atheist, Black was also a lonely college kid, and accepted the invitation. They talked about religion, because that was deemed a safer

topic than Black's background or political ideologies, and became genuine friends. Instead of grilling him, which, Black said, he would have been comfortable with, having been doing media interviews since he was twelve, instead something much harder happened. Black said in an interview, "I think I was less worried about being grilled than what actually happened, where I wasn't grilled and had to spend, ultimately, years of really enjoyable time among people who — the fact that I was friends with them was contradictory to my worldview."

That's not to say that Stevenson didn't challenge Black. He did. Stevenson would challenge Black's interpretation of statistics, his views of social science, his background. Challenges Black had been shooting down his whole life, had been trained to shoot down. But because they came from someone he trusted, someone who seemed to truly listen to him, those challenges, that contradiction, became impossible for Black to ignore. It changed him. Black said in the interview, "I think the real thing that happened, where I was just at a Shabbat dinner for two years, and I had to say, "Well, I think my ideology is very anti-Semitic. Maybe I like this dinner, though."

It would have been easier for Stevenson to write Black off as a lost cause, a hurtful, hateful person who could never be anything but that. Everyone else on campus certainly did. But by sticking with Black, by sticking up for Black at times even, by refusing to give up on him, Stevenson moved him from a perpetrator of hate to someone who now works on the frontlines of undoing racist ideology in this country. Now again, like I said last week, not all of us will have stories and experiences as extreme as this one. But we all have the

equivalent of the mean kid in the tennis club. Someone for whom continually behaving well to their anger is going to turn the tables in our favor and show the error of their ways.

Niceness, dear people of God, is not a weakness, it's a superpower. It is how we move people from where they are to where they could be, to the people God has created them to be. Be nice. It's super hard, I know. I'd rather be angry or dismissive. But niceness, or as God calls it, mercy, is how lives are changed and the world is transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.