

I'll Pray For Me

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The devil tempts Jesus to become different than God created him to be. In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus is led into temptation right before he begins his ministry and preaches the sermon on the mount. Jesus says to the devil who is tempting him:

Away with you Satan!

For it is written, worship God and serve only God.

In these increasingly tribal times, we are being tempted to hate. Our hearts, shaped for love by our parents, grandparents (and that means great aunts and uncles), Sunday school teachers, senior friends, choir directors-- our faith formed hearts, are at risk of hardening in these times.

And the devil smirks... hardening for good reason... look at what's going on in the world....

What's going on in the world?...

We were beginning to feel giddy with hope when the vaccines started going into more and more arms, lives gradually unfolding again as springtime turned into summer, but then the anti-vaccine movement reared its ugly head by spreading lies; and what seemed like an inexorable salvific movement of science and public health towards a vaccinated nation, as with smallpox, polio and influenza, stopped. Ignorance is dangerous. It's actually killing us. And its maiming the spirits of those in the high callings of medicine and education and mental health. And it threatens to upend the wonderful ecosystem of voluntary associations in our country-- religious, social, artistic... And worst of all, it menaces the innocent, the lives of young children under 12, those whom we cannot yet protect with vaccine. The blame falls squarely on those who refuse to get vaccinated because we could have achieved herd immunity by now. (Vaccines have been free and easily available to everyone for months). But their selfishness and ignorance is costing all of us more than we can even imagine!

What's going on in the world?

Did you feel the smoke in your own lungs this summer, from the fires raging across the continent? In August we were double masking for double reasons. How did life get so dystopian? We've been educating and organizing around climate change for well over 20 years,(at the same time, of course, the fossil fuel industry was spreading disinformation)... and now it is affecting all of us, with higher temperatures, floods and fires, greater storms, soon out of sight insurance costs.....Surely there can be no more climate change denial in our land! And we have solutions, we really do!, often more economical. But law makers, too many of you, continue to vote against these solutions! How can this be? Is it because of your religion, that you believe this is all in God's plan? That's not *our* Christianity.

And because of *your* take on the bible our planet will gradually die, and our children will increasingly live lives of quiet desperation? Or is it because of greed? Or both? How dare you?

And there's more...Since George Floyd's murder, there's been a transformation of consciousness throughout the land, an uncovering, a reckoning... about how racism has distorted our nation's soul from the very beginning and each one of our souls ever since... and with it a renewed hope that we will finally complete the reconstruction. The communal repairing is beginning...person by person, institution by institution, city by city, state by state, nationally and internationally...the healing of our sick white supremacist souls. But now there is a growing, absolutely perverse counter movement in our country that harkens back to Jim Crowe, voter suppression, with demonically clever new ways to restrict voting. Oh if they could take history back even further would they put the 3/5 clause back in the constitution?!

And how do they sleep at night?, those lawmakers who not only refuse to unearth the truth of what happened on Jan 6th so that we can prevent it from happening again, but they are so morally weak that they won't even speak out against those most responsible for inciting this attempted coup. (It is eerily reminiscent of how other countries have slipped into authoritarianism....) Your great grandchildren will read about you some day and how you cared more about being re-elected so you could keep the wealth in the hands of the wealthiest than you do about preserving and strengthening one of the most remarkable, though deeply flawed, democracies in human history.

We sat on the porch at the cabin this summer and talked about what's going on in the world with family and friends over cups of coffee in the morning and then again later in the day over a glass of sparkling juice or a beer. We talk and talk. Are the children listening to us? Is our three year old grand daughter taking it in? if not the words, the tone of voices or look on our faces? Does it shape her heart?... form her faith?

We keep talking...What's going on?! What's behind all of these demonic shenanigans? racism, misogyny, theology or a mix? Yes. And it's also about a large segment of society who feel that the American dream has passed them by. Small town life altered dramatically with big box stores and population changes. Except for the bars, churches and other locations of collective care, shriveling down to nothing. And decent, well-paying jobs that offer pension security, few and far between. Deaths of despair are increasing as is shame and bitterness. And people are easily manipulated by the internet and Fox news and would be authoritarian leaders. (Thank goodness for the organizers grounded in a race/class narrative that helps us empathize and make connections with those in the other tribe.)

But what about the ones behind the curtain, the ones with the *real* power, the ones far from the drama of Jan 6th or any action in the streets, those safely ensconced in one of their many mansions in a gated community... the rich, growing richer by the day... how many more joined the ranks of billionaires during this pandemic? And now they are funding behind the scenes lobbying, against clean energy legislation, because it will require higher taxes. Don't they smell the smoke there in Montana? Don't

they worry about the smoke getting into their grandchildren's lungs? Don't they worry about planetary extinction? Are they sadistic or just greedy? *How* do we love them?

Oh, that porch conversation grows increasingly animated. You find yourself saying hateful things. What does your three year old grandchild hear? Could it be that one day, maybe when she's four or five or six, she'll take your hand and say: "Come on nonna. Come with me..." And she'll take you into the little cabin and point up to a beautifully framed poster that her great grandmother, her middle namesake Joyce, hung on that wall many years ago, and your granddaughter will say: "Look nonna. Look at that." It says:

"Let us not become the evil we deplore."

Last week we reflected on how this body of Christ, this church, *can save us*, in this good but hard life through all the acts of communion—cards, meals, hugs, and especially prayer, which hold us afloat during trying times: We reflected on how the phrase "I'll pray for you" can mean so much.

Could it be that praying for our own self, I'll pray for me, you pray for you, can help save our world... by keeping us loving...?

This passage, *love your enemies*, has become increasingly difficult for me. Is it for you? So hard that I had to bring home a big pile of books from my office library, biblical commentaries and more, to try to understand it, once again. It turned out that all I really needed was to read one of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons. Very well educated in the academy but equally if not more important well educated in real life, as a black child and then a black man, a father to black children, a minister in a black church... living in a racist world, with daily assaults to his humanity, his children's humanity, his parishioners' humanity. Like Gandhi, like The Dalai Lama, like Desmond Tutu... How does *he* not hate the enemy?

Every year MLK preached at least one sermon on this passage, because he so needed it?

This love for the enemy is not about feelings-- like the love you have for your spouse, eros, or for your friend, philia. This love is agape... It's God's love flowing through you... It's not that you must come to like your enemy... it's more about trying, and trying some more, and more still until it begins to happen... seeing the enemy from God's point of view... It's about letting God's love, which is for everyone, God loves everyone, flow through you... It's about being an instrument of God's love. Simply put: "Love them cuz God loves them."

Doctor King talks about three reasons to love our enemy. Let me break it down for you. Three reasons. Remember these.

1. Hate for hate only intensifies the hate and evil in the universe. We have to stop the descending spiral of hate.

2. Hate distorts the personality of the hater. It becomes a cancer that gnaws away at the vital center of your life.
3. Love has a redemptive power. It eventually transforms the enemy. Just keep loving them until they can't stand it anymore and they give in... 😊

So that's the philosophy behind it, the why. You've convinced us Dr. King. But how? How do you do something that goes so against the grain of normal human emotions and behavior? How do you love someone bent on destroying you or what you hold dear?

You gotta pray. You can't do this without God's help. Only prayer can keep us loving our enemies. No matter how smart you are, how good and broad and deep a philosophical thinker you are with that liberal arts degree, your mind can't take you there. Only your heart in prayer can help you do this nearly impossible thing of loving your enemies. And I'm not talking about those tame prayers that console, or help you cool your jets, or make it all nice, or calm you down or help you adjust to reality... No. it has to be big, intense, fiery, even outrageous prayer... Only with heat can we be cooked and transformed....

Oh God help us! Give us the strength to love!

And we need to pray all through the day. If your practice has fallen away, take it up again. Try centering prayer --sitting for 20 minutes in silence consenting to God's presence and action within. Do the lovingkindness chant. Read the daily message from the UCC, get on the email list of Contemplative outreach or Richard Rohr: Feed off this throughout the week, instead of just the news... If hate arises during the day, do a breath prayer or a mantra or sing a verse of a song. You choir members are lucky: You have prayers, in the form of songs, well planted in your hearts. May you call it forth when you need it. And worship, we need to help one another find and stay on the Jesus path and true worship is all about that.

Think of how MLK and his companions were filled with the spirit on Sunday morning, the music, the singing, the preaching... How else could they have done it? *When you are refusing to seat me at the counter... I'll still love you... And arresting me ruthlessly... I'll love you... Throwing me in jail... I'll love you... "I love you. I would rather die than hate you."* MLK preached.

Our worship, our prayers, our songs prepare us for when we go there, when we face our opponents, our enemies in the fight for justice. When we go to the capital to lobby or testify, and hear what they say to and about us, we will still love them. When we put our body on the line to stop line 3, and they are standing against us, we will look at them and see them as children of God, in that fearful moment, we will... And when we see the large truck barreling down the highway past us, with Qanon bumper stickers, we will breathe in and out the words....*let God's love... flow through me...*

Remember when Nancy Pelosi said that she prays for Donald Trump every day? We can believe that she was telling the truth. She's a devout Catholic. That's why she works so hard for social justice, why she's poured out her life to do everything she can, to create a caring economy and government, even if it means making enemies... But she's also praying every day for these enemies. She's doing both. Can't do one without the other. That's what her Lord Jesus tells her.

The story goes that the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain, and let's imagine that the devil put some magic glasses on Jesus, some tribal glasses, through which to see the world in front of him. And the devil says, with a smirk: "Look...Look at the people"

Jesus takes off the glasses and throws them to the ground and stomps on them with the same vehemence that he would use to upend the money changers tables in the days to come. And he says:

Away with you Satan!

For it is written: worship God and serve only God.

Let us pray:

God, help me to love my enemy every day.

Sources

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