

**What Is the Best Way to Love?**  
**Mayflower Church**  
**Rev Sarah Campbell**  
**January 22, 2023**  
**Micah 6:1-8**

While on sabbatical I read several books to help me with my project "A Playbook for Political Action in the Progressive Church: One Church's Story". One of the books was the American classic, Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals. (Remember that the word "radical" has to do with the "root", as in root causes.) I was challenged by Alinsky's assertions. Some were clarifying and some I disagree with. But the book reengaged a question I've lived with for decades. *Do the ends, in our kingdom of God work, justify the means? ...*

I want to throw in a reminder here about sermons and again this is my take, that the sermon is the beginning of a conversation, (or the intensifying of a conversation), not somehow the final answer or the "word of God". The preacher, as resident theologian, needs to be grounded in the Bible, in prayer, and in the news of the day and the stories of our lives, often using examples from our own life only in the hope that it will speak to something in your life. This is a conversation, to be continued in coffee hour or the weeks to come.

Back to this morning's sermon...

So... I'm on sabbatical, living in Rome, reading Alinsky and I think of the Sunday New York Times book review section when an author is asked: "You're organizing a literary dinner party: Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?" And I would add: what would you serve?

That morning, I thought I'd invite Saul Alinsky, the famous community organizer out of Chicago in the mid-1900s and I'd invite Martin Buber, the Jewish mystic philosopher of the early 1900s. I would serve a risotto con fruti de mare with fresh seafood from the fish store just across the street, a good bottle of Barolo, and of course, Tiramisu. I'd serve it up and then sit down and listen with rapt attention!

Alinsky would be animated, passionate and verbose. Listen in with me to this dinner table conversation....

*The book The Prince, you know it? he'd say, was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold onto power. My book, Rules for Radicals, is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.*

*It's all about power. How to get it and how to use it. Power is not a bad word. It means the ability to act. Power is an essential life force always in operation either changing the world or opposing change. Power has always been derived from two main sources, money and people. Lacking money, the Have Nots have the people.*

*I believe in converting hot, emotional, impulsive passions that are usually impotent and frustrating into actions that will be calculated, purposeful, and effective.*

*Now what about all the people in the middle, you may be wondering, not the Haves or the Have Nots, but what some call the middle class. I think they are ready to be organized. Usually they are tepid, and rooted in inertia, even numb, bewildered. They are often do nothings who profess*

*an interest but don't really do anything, saying: "I agree with your ends but not your means." They have a "no offense" style. An aversion to conflict, tension, rudeness, ridicule.*

*Yet, and here's the thing! out of this class, the middle class, with few exceptions, have come the great world leaders of the past centuries. This class is ripe with possibility.*

*It's the job of organizers and leaders to fan the embers of hopelessness of this large middle class into a flame of fight. To excite the imagination and create with them tactics by which they can feel their power. They really are ready, I believe, to move toward major confrontation with corporate America and with the growing billionaire class.*

*And make no mistake, the wealthy and powerful may play along for a while, use green in their advertising, but ultimately they have a vested interest in the world staying unchanged. But the middle class, with the right tactics, is ready to go on the offensive, nonviolently of course.*

*Now.... in a complex society it becomes more and more difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil, and there is always clever evasion of responsibility. But through good research, a target can and must be identified. You freeze the target, personalize it (can't be general and abstract) and with this comes polarization. And the potential for real change. John Lewis, the leader of the CIO labor organization in the 1930s never attacked General Motors: He always attacked, verbally, the president Alfred Sloan. **Pick the target!, freeze it! personalize it!, polarize it!**, the breathless, excited Saul Alinsky would say at that imaginary dinner party.*

*This is when Martin Buber would quietly, calmly and with kind eyes interject... I wonder... Whether this personalizing a target inevitably leads to objectifying a human being. There are two different orientations, I believe, we can bring to our encounters with another human in our midst, no matter who they are or the length and nature of the exchange. You can approach the other with a genuine feeling of "I thou" or a feeling of "I it". "I thou" is acknowledging the divine in the other. "I it" is treating the other person as an object. It's a dehumanizing attitude. At the end of a yoga practice, you say: "Namaste... The God in me bows to, or sees, the God in you". What's more, once we no longer see the Godness in the other, our own soul begins to rot. Saul Alinsky, how do you have an "I Thou" orientation with a "target"? Not saying it can't be done, but how?*

*Hmm.... Silence... at that dinner table with Alinsky and Buber, a thoughtful silence.... Maybe they'd look at me, Saul with his fiery, alive, loving eyes, and Martin with his calm, kind, loving eyes, and say what do you think? What's your experience?*

*Maybe I'd share my personal story. We all have them.*

*I was raised in the liberal UCC church during the 1960s and Martin Luther King Jr. was my hero. I knew at a young age that I would work for the kingdom of God on earth. After college I moved to Omaha NE where my husband had a job. I then got a job as a community organizer in a low-income neighborhood and was trained in Chicago by the Industrial Areas Foundation.*

*I remember, in particular, a woman named Creola Woodal, a person I met while door knocking. She became a powerful leader in our organization. The prayers she gave in the mayor's office or at the meeting with the chief of police were amazing! I remember one cold day in the middle of winter, at her front door, we were finishing up some final details for an upcoming meeting, when she mentioned how cold it was also in her home. She said the heat had been shut off because they couldn't pay the bill. I remember weeks later, a meeting with people from the*

*utility company, maybe the executive, they were all in power suits. I think we got a win, no heat shut offs in the middle of winter, I hope so, but I honestly don't remember exactly.*

*I loved being a community organizer. I loved the creativity and turning people out and the victories. But I became increasingly uncomfortable with the organizing tactics that required targeting individuals, public officials and corporate execs at meetings with the community, giving them a list of demands and the tension in the room. It didn't feel kind... or maybe it didn't feel "nice"?*

*Eventually I left organizing and went to seminary.*

*Now some 40 years later I feel differently. Glad I'm a minister. No regrets there. But my understanding of the word kindness has changed, deepened, broadened. Isn't kindness to Creola's family and others in the same predicament more important than not offending a utility executive? What's more, isn't it ultimately kinder to this executive to help him convert to compassion, so that on his death bed he doesn't have regrets about these families, about their children freezing in their own homes? Going on "the offensive", nonviolently, of course, may sometimes be the most kind thing of all.*

Our scripture this morning ends with "What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God". It is a much-loved passage, but sometimes it can seem almost contradictory. What happens when justice doesn't *seem* kind, in the moment? Is it helpful to know the context of this passage, that the prophet Micah lives in a time not unlike ours with extreme disparities in wealth and in power? About this, Micah says: *Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields and seize them; houses and take them away....* Micah says: *Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity...* And is it helpful to know that hesed, what we translate as kindness, has to do with steadfast love for God and God's people? Hesed is not about being "nice".

And is it helpful to be awake to the news, when wondering about how far to go, how fiercely to fight for justice, always nonviolently: for justice? From last week, yet again we read this: "Research shows that Exxon modeled and predicted global warming with shocking skill and accuracy starting in the 1970s—even surpassing those of academic and governmental scientists. Despite those forecasts, the multinational energy giant continued to sow doubt about the gathering climate crisis."

Oh Saul Alinsky, how we wish you had organized against Exxon; targeted, and converted, willingly or not, the CEO of Exxon in the late 1970s. Was his name Clifton Garvon? He needed your brand of loving kindness.

Back to the imaginary dinner party. We get to invite one more guest. Three guests, remember.... Saul Alinsky, Martin Buber, and how about Jesus?!

Jesus, what do you think? Do doing justice and loving kindness ever contradict? How far is too far in our organizing for God's dream justice?

Maybe Jesus would say: *I said love your enemy, not don't make any.*

Maybe Jesus would tell a couple of stories about tables.

*Remember I turned over the tables on that fateful day in the temple. That was a very deliberate, strategic, public action. It was not impulsive. To tell the leaders that be that what is, is not what ought to be.*

*But remember, I also sat at the table with everyone, including those in power, including billionaires, those who want the system to stay put. I spent time with them. I loved them. Sometimes they changed.*

*And remember, Jesus would say, and this is at the heart of it all. I would regularly get away from all the tables, all the people, get away to pray, to open myself to God, to be filled up again with God, so I could walk on the path of life humbly centered in God, and not in myself. This gave me wisdom and courage too.*

Then Jesus would smile and then ask: Say! What is in this risotto? It's delicious. Clams, mussels, squid, shrimp. He'd say: No octopus??

#### **Sources**

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