

The friends I was with in Utah earlier this month all know me and know each other through different connections, though this was the first time all four of us ever did something together. These were people with whom I worked and went to school and traveled for both conferences and vacations. We've been with each other through graduations and ordinations, weddings and divorces. We've supported each other through pregnancy and childbirth, childlessness by choice, childlessness not by choice, health scares, confirmed diagnosis, surgeries, and treatment, through changing jobs, changing homes, the death of pets, the death of parents. They are good friends. And that is probably why it felt so strange to me when it was time to divide up our expenses at the end of the trip. Two of us had made hotel reservations for the group, one had bought plane tickets, one had reserved the rental car...all with everyone else's permission and the plan to settle up at the end. But I still felt uncomfortable essentially handing a bill to people who had been there for some of the best and worst times in my life. It probably felt unnatural because God never intended our relationships to be transactional, and although so much of our life does end up working that way, we know, deep down, that's not how we wish the world worked.

Jesus would not have been at all surprised by the four of us essentially lending to one another what we fully expected to receive back. It's easy to give to people who you trust will give back to you, Jesus says, whether it's love or good works or money; even people who have no interest in living as God instructs us to live will participate in that transactional economy of giving as much as you expect to get. That's just the way the world works, right? No free lunch. But this is the same Jesus who last week told us that the poor are blessed and the rich are in trouble, so he's not going to let us stop with loving those who love us or lending to those with a good credit score.

*If anyone is still listening, Jesus says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you... If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt...* Oh, come on, Jesus, be realistic. It's one thing to do right by our friends, our family, even people who are just neutral toward us. But love our enemies? Do good to those who hate us? Bless those who curse us? You first, Jesus...but then, of course, he did. And for what it's worth, every world religion includes that same basic idea: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

We have such a high bar of kindness set for us because God does for us exactly what Jesus says we should do for others. We don't love others *so that God will* love us, but because God first loves us, we should—or we could even say we *get to*—love others, even if we expect nothing good from them in return. If you've ever been where two or three young kids are gathered, you know that a sense of what is “fair” is ingrained in us pretty early. So, we don't like it when the Most High is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked—that's not fair! And when we perceive that injustice, we may want to take matters into our own hands. Yet Jesus says *be merciful*, just as God is merciful because sometimes, the ungrateful wicked people to whom God is showing mercy is us!

If this all sounds too daunting, if we're tempted to say, well, Jesus didn't have to put up with *my* enemy, at least a little good news is that we are not supposed to be doing all this enemy-loving

on our own. Most of Jesus' words are addressed to the group as a whole. We are to be a *community* that loves our enemies, a *community* that does good to the haters, a *community* that blesses and prays for people who by any objective metric do not deserve our kindness. It's hard to stand up to bullies, and even harder to stand by our convictions instead of sinking to their level—exchanging evil for evil like this transactional world teaches us. But if we are going to do what Jesus tells us to do, stand by his example and treat people the way we want to be treated, regardless of how they treat us, we won't be standing alone. Jesus calls the whole community to stand right there with us when, instead of retaliating, we act in Christ-like love.

Jesus teaches us not to retaliate, because if we return violence for violence, hate for hate, we let our enemy drag us down into the mud with them, and the mess just gets messier: hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that, the other Martin Luther, that is, Dr. King, tells us. But Jesus' instruction to offer the other cheek is not an invitation to further abuse: *just let yourself keep getting hit*. No, offering the other cheek is an act of resistance. It forces the other person to look you in the eye and choose: they either have to deny that you are a beloved child of God to keep hurting you *or* acknowledge your shared humanity and start treating you like a fellow member of the one human community. The same with the person who takes your coat: offering them your shirt forces them to decide what kind of person they want to be; if someone is going to be shamed, it's not you for being naked, but the thug who took your shirt.

We live in world that tells us to idolize the one taking coats and shirts, not the one standing half-naked in the cold with only the fierce flame of conviction to keep warm. We're taught that there's only so much to go around, and since some people *won't* do for others what they'd want others to do for them, we shouldn't either, lest we end up on the losing side of an unequal bargain. But Jesus wants us to stop looking at our relationships as bargains. He wants us to feel strange any time we relate to others in transactional ways, not just when we're splitting a bill with our best friends. Jesus calls us to treat people very differently than our society tells us we should, even and especially when we won't be treated well in return. It's not easy, it's not fair, but we're called to do it anyway.

I don't have magic advice to make loving our enemies easier, though I will say this: we could try having fewer of them. Yes, in the course of life we're likely to encounter some people who, because of how they treat us, earn that title "enemy" and we'll have to struggle, in those interpersonal relationships, to act in love. But remember I said Jesus addresses most of this sermon to a group, and our whole society is in a serious, perilous, deeply divided mess, and one reason why is that too many of us have been too eager to believe that other people, even whole groups of other people, even people we've never met, even people who have never caused us the slightest harm, are enemies who deserve to have done to them what we would *never* want done to us. That's one way of looking at the world, but that's not the life that Jesus calls us to live. May God help us to love, bless, pray, give, *forgive*, do good, and be merciful like God has done to us.