

Proper 22 A
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How Would You Answer Jesus' Question?
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“To follow Jesus is to love your way through the darkness of the world. This love appears absurd – in fact pure folly in the face of much of the world’s misery – and yet it yields indescribable levels of sorrow and joy, sadness and ecstasy.” This quote from philosopher and activist Dr. Cornel West describes the preaching and life of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry. In his new book, *Love is the Way, Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*, Bishop Curry shares moments of his own life that are both sorrowful and joyful, and how the love of God gives hope and the ability to see reality clearly.

One such story took place before he was a bishop and was serving as a priest at St. James Episcopal Church in Baltimore when he presided over his first funeral. This was far from the first funeral he had ever attended, but it was the first he presided over. It was for a 19-year-old man named Dwayne who had gotten involved with gangs and been violently killed, gunned down in the street by members of a rival gang. Dwayne’s mother had been a long-time member of the church, and Bishop Curry writes that in addition to familiar parishioners, many of Dwayne’s friends also attended the funeral. Several of them were asked to be pallbearers and carried their friend’s coffin to its final resting place. Bishop Curry writes that after the final prayers at the graveside, after the family had put flowers on the coffin, after the invitation to return to the church for a meal, everyone left the cemetery except the young men who had carried Dwayne’s coffin. They stayed behind, and one by one, went up to the coffin, touched it and said, “Dwayne, I’ll see you real soon.”

As Bishop Curry watched this ritual, he realized these young men were not expressing a belief in heaven. He realized they loved each other, but the love was somehow tainted, it lacked the embodiment of the Love of God in Christ and they had no rituals or belief structures other than those they learned on the streets. To them, death, not love, was god. Their community was one of violence and their rituals were those of violence and destruction. And the only thing violence creates is more violence and death.

It was a realization that brought him sadness. And in following the way of Love, he writes that parish started a new ministry that focused on community outreach.

That same realization is what Jesus brought to light when he asked the religious leaders a question about the parable he was telling in today's Gospel. Many scholars and commentators suggest this parable is an allegory to the life and death of Jesus: how God sent prophets and John the Baptist to the Israelites who didn't listen to their warnings to turn and follow God's ways and instead abused and killed them. Then they killed God's Son. And you could certainly read the parable this way. But there can be layers of meanings in parables, and this one is no different. Jesus used parables in different ways; sometimes it was to get people to think about concepts and biases they had about God and each other, and other times it was a way to take a look at themselves. That is what I believe this parable was for.

Jesus set the stage of a landowner planting a vineyard and giving it everything it needed, then giving it to the care of tenants who would not give the produce when the landowner sent emissaries to collect it. The tenants Jesus described in the parable were a violent lot who showed no respect for the lives of the emissaries nor the landowner who sent them. Even the landowner's own son was violently killed, and his body treated with disrespect. We could say these tenants might sound like a street gang or some other violent group protecting their turf.

That is the point in today's Gospel where Jesus broke off telling the parable to ask the religious leaders a question. It's a question that gives the religious leaders an opportunity to show they recognize what this parable is about and to reveal what they believe. The question Jesus asked is, "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to the tenants?"

The answer the religious leaders gave revealed that to them, like the young men who attended the first funeral Bishop Curry presided over, death was god, not love. Their answer echoed the same behavior of the tenants, that of violence and death. It's too bad because they could have given a different answer. Being religious leaders, they could have remembered the first 7 verses in the 5th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah where the prophet wrote a love song about a vineyard planted by a loving landowner who despite providing all the care possible, the vineyard never produced good grapes and this caused the landowner deep grief. Or they might have remembered the scripture Jesus quoted from the 22nd verse of Psalm 118 about the stone rejected by builders becoming the cornerstone of a structure.

Such scriptures reveal God is a God of love, not death. God gives and transforms life, even life others reject. Through his life, Jesus showed this time and time again. Whenever Jesus healed someone, he wasn't just restoring their physical

well-being, he was restoring them to their community, family, and faith. The ill and deformed were not permitted to attend synagogue or temple worship and being healed meant they were literally given new life. They were liberated from their illness. Jesus was someone who welcomed the outcast, who forgave the sinner, restoring them to community. Jesus wasn't just prescribing a way to do community, he was showing us God's nature, how God loves those who have been rejected, and yearns to be in relationship with them. These are all ways God is love not death. God doesn't choose violence, but all too often, we humans do.

It doesn't have to be physical violence. We broken humans have a variety of forms of violence we inflict on one another. Sometimes it is the physical kind that crates scars or takes life. Sometimes it is the emotional kind that harms a person too deep to show physically but whose scars show up in the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. You don't have to scroll very far on Facebook or twitter feeds to see the verbal violence that has become all too common; words used as weapons that get lifted up as truth but remember truth is what sets you free, it isn't what hurts or shuts you down. This kind of violence manifests in snide comments and acerbic phrases that masquerade as humor but instead can hurt and lead to more division in our families, communities, and our country. One of the downfalls of social media is that it makes it all too easy to participate in this sort of violence because it can feel so good to nurse anger and hatred, especially when others respond with more of the same. There is very little accountability on social media and it is easy to not see the other side and the harm caused by our words.

I have good friends who use social media this way, but in the last few days I have read posts from them that reveal recently they realized feeding their anger and resentment hasn't liberated them, it was instead toxic, causing them to hurt themselves far more than the systems or people they hate. This realization is liberating them because it frees from the violence anger inflicts and is causing a change in their spirit and behavior. In a beautiful act of penitence and forgiveness, they are promising to pray for those who make them angry instead of wishing them harm, and already they feel the breath of life and renewal that comes from the liberating, life-giving love of God and are starting to see hope where they couldn't before.

As Dr. Cornel West observed, followers of Jesus are called to love our way through the world. Through the darkness of the world. Through the light. Through the tough times. Through the frightening times. Through the joyful times. Through uncertain times. Our call, even though it is not always easy, is always to love.

This love is not sentimental; it is not cheap, nor is it a quick, easy fix. The love of God in Christ is a choice and a commitment, a way of life for our whole lives. It is participating in rituals like Sunday worship, it is caring for others even if you have to give up some personal comfort. Far from being a doormat, it is praying for our loved ones and it means praying for our enemies. It means standing up for ourselves and others in ways that help open hearts and minds instead of shutting them down. It means creating a community that welcomes and includes all: people of all colors, all politics, all economic status, all genders, and sexual orientations. It means looking at all people – even ones we can't stand- and seeing a beloved child of God, a human being made in God's own image. It means choosing love over violence which means never wishing another person harm in any form. It means forsaking malice for being what St. Francis called an instrument of peace.

Violence might be an easier choice, but it is not what brings life, healing, and well-being to the world. Violence only brings death and destruction and it is not the way of Jesus. It is much harder to live into the beautiful prayer attributed to St. Francis, who we remember today, that much like the quote from Dr. West calls us to love our way through life; to "sow love where there is hatred, pardon where there is injury, union where there is discord, hope where there is despair, joy where there is sadness. To have the courage to console others more than seek personal comfort, to seek to understand the other instead of being understood, for it is in giving that we receive and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." This is what it looks like to love our way through any time, even this time. And while it might, as Dr. West warned, seem absurd to a world that prefers violence, such love is the only way to heal the wounds of violence and bring God's kingdom to earth.

Perhaps on this feast day of St. Francis, it is a good time to reflect on the ways we might be embracing violence instead of love, and like those friends of mine, repent and forgive and change, turn away from hate and toward Jesus. To pray for those we disagree with, to try harder to listen to another's viewpoint, even if we don't agree, and to practice seeing people through God's eyes of liberating, life giving love. We can do it. We can choose to love, and love is the only true hope in this and in any time.