



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### All Saints' Day

#### Paradox

[RCL] Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Brené Brown, in her work, *Atlas of the Heart*, explores the concept of paradox and cognitive dissonance. Paradox is when we “straddle the tension of two conflicting elements and recognize that they can both be true.” For example, the act of crying can be a response to pain or a joyous event. To see someone cry does not immediately tell us which emotion they are feeling. Indeed, at times, the painful act of crying gives us relief from the pain we may be experiencing. Brown goes on to say, “Even though the elements seem contradictory, they actually complement and inform each other in ways that allow us to discover underlying truths about ourselves in the world.” We perhaps see this paradox most often at funerals, especially of those who have lived long lives. While we are mourning the loss of a friend, colleague, or family member, we often hear laughter and joy among those who haven’t seen each other in a long time or as we remember the life of the one who has passed. This is a paradox.

On the other side, we have cognitive dissonance. Here, we try to hold two thoughts or beliefs that are inconsistent with each other. Those who love eating unhealthy foods know this very well. While we know that fatty, sweet foods are not great for us, we may choose to eat them anyway. And we might justify that these are just special treats, but ten donuts later, we remember that justifying an action that is counter to what we know to be true *is* quite difficult.

Today’s Gospel can feel very much like cognitive dissonance, especially when Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” Why should it be virtuous, why should this be an invitation from Jesus that we should allow harm to come to us? Indeed, Jesus is not inviting us to participation in our own destruction, but into a deeper practice of love that draws all of us closer to God. For a deeper understanding of the Good News in this passage, we turn to the story of non-violent protests of the 1960s.

On March 7, 1965, in Selma, Alabama, the now-departed activist and later senator John Lewis and Hosea Williams attempted to lead approximately 600 people on a march from Selma to Montgomery. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they were met with violence from state troopers and others who wanted to maintain the status quo, maintain their power, and demonstrate their warped sense of powerful superiority over other human beings based on race. The marchers, although faced with violence and death, did not retaliate, for they were followers of a non-violent movement. And while those who stood on the side of

racist policies believed that their work of violence won, they did not fully understand what the images of one-sided violence would do for the larger movement for equal rights and freedom.

There are many, then and now, who say that non-violence is merely compliance with one's own abuse. And indeed, readings like today's Gospel passage have a long history in the destructive ways that Christianity has been used incorrectly as a tool of oppression. Harmful theology would say that those who were hungry, oppressed, and denied their humanity did not need to worry about their current condition because they would reap their joy in heaven. But this is not the work of non-violence; choosing to not react to violence with violence is not compliance – it is resistance. Choosing non-violence is also not an act of justification. The one who chooses the path of non-violence does not approve of being assaulted, bruised, and killed by others. Rather, that one is choosing to be undeterred in their own spiritual foundation because of the actions of another. In fact, the act of non-violent resistance is a public witness. It highlights the lack of strength, superiority, or spiritual health in the abuser.

Vincent Harding, in the preface to Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, writes, "The ultimate issue is not being more moral than white folks, but becoming more free than we have ever been, free to engage our fullest powers in the transformative tasks that await us." Thurman later writes, "Anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny." Harding and Thurman are inviting us to a way of understanding freedom that includes our experience and goes beyond it to a deep spiritual knowing. As the reading explains today, having the luxuries of this life does not mean that we are living in ways that align with God's dream for our world. Those non-violent practitioners on the Edmund Pettus Bridge were saying, "You, abuser, will not determine my response. You will not send me into disequilibrium. You will not make me act outside of my character."

On that bloody Sunday, those that fought for the right to vote marched out of their profoundly deep knowledge of a loving, liberating, and life-giving God. They knew God's love, and it is from there that they would move through the world. The choices of others would not deter their strong foundation. Perhaps this is the lesson we should take on this All Saints' Day. Sainthood is not about being perfect or performing piety, and neither does one perform non-violence as a way of seeming more virtuous. Indeed, the work involved in both piety and non-violence is not easy, is not passive, and does not require perfection or performance. John Lewis' biography details how the work of non-violence was deeply spiritual and required practice. Before students sat at a lunch counter, they sat in a basement practicing what love might look like in the face of hate. They had to pray together, learn together, and build up their muscles in order to face hate with love. Their goal was not only to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven in the spiritual realm of the great beyond but also to find freedom for themselves and others on earth. They knew a Christ whose crucifixion and resurrection were for those who live, as Thurman writes, "with their backs against the wall."

If we see today's Gospel as paradox and not cognitive dissonance, then we know that the message is not one of waiting until death to gain access to God's Kingdom. Rather, it is an invitation to move through the world knowing whom God has called blessed: the poor, the hungry, and those who work toward justice,

freedom, and liberation of all of God's children. Freedom and liberation are not only for those who live with their backs against the wall but also for those who have committed violence or oppression. They are for those not yet ready to relinquish overindulgence and greed. They are for those who desire the maintenance of power over others, rather than seeing the gifts of walking with others. God wants freedom for those who experience violence and those who practice it. We are, as the collect has it, knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Christ. All Saints' Day reminds us to strive for a world with more peace, more justice, more connection, and more love. Amen.

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