

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There was an online newsletter post this past week by a New Testament professor at one of the seminaries up in the Chicago area that has been getting some attention. The title of the post was “Evangelicalism Needs to Get Saved.”¹ It took the Evangelical movement in the United States to task for its narrow understanding of the church as white, male, and American, and suggested that it was much less interested in following Jesus than it was with cultural and political power. It highlighted a number of recent high-profile scandals in Evangelical churches as side effects of this misguided focus. Another commentator this week, in reviewing the original post, asked the question, “Is Evangelicalism even Christian anymore?” if it so blatantly disregards Jesus’ own teachings? Now even though I am in general agreement with these critiques, I am not at all interested in talking about the sins of Evangelicalism this morning. I bring it up only because our Gospel reading this week made us wonder if we might not ask the same questions, or make the same critiques of ourselves. Lent is late this year. We don’t usually make it as far as the sixth and seventh Sundays after Epiphany, and so we don’t often hear these difficult readings from the Sermon on the Plain in Luke. These are hard sayings of Jesus, shocking even. They are disorienting and provoke self-examination. It’s almost as if we have started Lent early and get nine weeks of it this year. This Gospel text leads us to hold ourselves up to the mirror (as I suggested a few weeks ago) and see where our beliefs and assumptions diverge from Jesus’ own teaching and intentions.

Maybe the most upsetting thing about this reading today is the way it undermines our sense of who we are. Everything that we can point to to demonstrate that we are good, respectable people is dismissed out of hand by Jesus as nothing special. We love those who love us. We are good family people. We put our children first. We care for our parents. We’re loyal to our friends. We’re responsible citizens. We vote. We pay our taxes. We might even volunteer our time and resources to worthy causes. Good for you, says Jesus, but even sinners do that. (I should pause here and mention that Jesus is not using the term sinners in the theological sense that we Lutherans like to use it. He is using it in the cultural sense of “lowlifes” or “those people who are not our people.” All non-Jews fit into this category.) So Jesus is saying that none of your decent, respectable behavior in any way distinguishes you from those people you like to think of yourself as superior to. Oof!

Then maybe the second most upsetting thing here is how Jesus’ teaching here confounds our sense of justice and fairness. Love your enemies? Really? Do good to those who hate you? Pray for those who abuse you? Come on! Do you mean, Jesus, the radical Muslim terrorists who crashed planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? Do you mean people who victimize children? Do you mean people who shoot up schools and movie theaters and concerts? Love those people? Not only is this outrageous, it’s unrealistic. We can’t do *that*. We’re not wired that way. It’s no wonder, then, that we don’t talk very much about these particular sayings of Jesus. No wonder no one is asking for these words to be posted on public monuments. “If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” Can you imagine that being posted in our courthouses? Or Jesus’ advice to “turn the other cheek”?

¹ https://scotmcknight.substack.com/p/evangelicalism-needs-to-get-saved?r=ilx28&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email&utm_source=url. See also <https://belover.medium.com/do-evangelicals-need-to-get-saved-86f3e65ab51d>

All of that is problematic enough, but the thing that really caught my attention in reading through and thinking about our Gospel text this time around was Jesus telling his disciples that loving their enemies, doing good, lending without expecting to be repaid, and so on, show them to be “children of the Most High.” And why? Because God is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Let me say that again. God is kind to the *ungrateful* and the *wicked*. Kindness to the ungrateful and wicked is a characteristic of God. And when we show kindness to those who are ungrateful and wicked we show ourselves to be children of God. How do you like them apples? Rubs you the wrong way, doesn’t it? I know it does me. It flies in the face of our cultural antipathy toward the so-called “undeserving poor,” the people we resist showing kindness too because of their poor choices and bad moral character. You know what I mean. You might not admit it in polite company, but you’ve had these thoughts. We shouldn’t help those who are unwilling to help themselves. We shouldn’t “give a man a fish” when we should be “teaching him to fish.” We shouldn’t give money to the homeless because they might go and buy alcohol with it. And we shouldn’t have government programs that give handouts to people who are poor because of their bad choices and immoral lifestyles. Kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked strikes directly at the core of everything we hold to be good, right, and decent. And yet kindness to the ungrateful and wicked is a characteristic of God and God’s children.

So that brings us back to the beginning and that uncomfortable question – not just about “those darned Evangelicals” but also about us: Are we even Christian if we are so fundamentally resistant to these difficult teachings of Jesus? Can we rightly consider ourselves followers of Jesus if we dismiss or ignore what Jesus says here?

The irony, and the saving grace of Jesus’ words is that precisely our resistance to this teaching puts us in the company of the ungrateful and wicked to whom God is kind. How do we even sing Amazing Grace with a straight face when we harbor such contradictory convictions? God knows what a pickle we’re in, and that we’re not getting out of it without help. The cross of Jesus, his death and resurrection for us and for our salvation is the solution we don’t deserve, the solution that rewrites our script and opens up for us new possibilities. In Jesus, God has loved us in spite of our ungratefulness and our wickedness so that we might be changed, so that we might begin to live out of the promise made to us in Holy Baptism that we *are* in fact children of God, and by faith we might begin to manifest the character of God in our relationship with the world around us.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I don’t claim that any of this is easy, or even realistic. Far from it. I don’t see how it’s possible to love my enemy, to give away my hard-earned resources, to not seek justice when I am wronged. But what we dare not do is pretend that Jesus didn’t mean any of this, or that he really meant the opposite of what he said. You know, “God loves those who help themselves” and other pious blasphemies. We must, at minimum, live in the tension of knowing that our cherished way of life is challenged by Jesus and belied by God’s love for the world in him. We can’t just make the difficulty go away, which is what we’ve effectively done all too often. And then, living in that tension, we must look to the promise that in him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is at work, even here and even now, to free us from the grip of sin, death, and evil and to transform our wickedness and ungratefulness into kindness and love.

May it be so. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding and confounds all expectations, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.