

Love Will Find A Way

February 2, 2025

Other

In the movie adaptation of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” it’s plain as day that Atticus Finch is our hero. There is no question that he is the messiah figure, that he is in the right. In the movie, we meet him as he has done some work for some poor townsfolk. He’s explaining to Scout, his daughter, that he’s allowing this fellow to pay him with hickory nuts, instead of with money, because he’s that poor.

In that one exchange, we see a man of justice and integrity, scruples and mercy, compassion and magnanimity, someone who has built up goodwill in the community far and wide. And yet, when Atticus defends a black man, all of that goodwill is erased in an instant. Like Jesus in our Gospel, Atticus’ willingness to acknowledge that justice and grace extend beyond our community is met with an angry mob, intent not only on maintaining the status quo, but on annihilating the other.

The trial scene includes one of the most powerful pauses in cinematic history. When Tom Robinson, the black man on trial for allegedly raping a white woman, testifies, “I felt sorry for her,” Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney, pauses and says, “You felt sorry? For her? A white woman?”

That incredulity, that a black person could possibly understand the social scales to be balanced in such a way that a white person could be the recipient of his sympathy was all the prosecutor needed. That is where he beat Tom Robinson. The twelve enfranchised white men, dare I speculate that they were all Christian, couldn’t abide by the idea that a black man could feel sorry for a white woman. All of Atticus’ logic, all of the facts, were lost at that point. All that mattered was keeping the black man down, keeping the other in its place.

Part of how “To Kill A Mockingbird” continues to resonate all these decades after Harper Lee wrote it is because this dynamic is so real. I’d even suggest it’s at the core of the current chaos in our country. Even more than ideals, even more than what’s good for them, people want to feel superior, want to “other” others.

So much of the cruelty masquerading as “America First” and anti-DEI is rooted in vilifying the other in order to create a sense of superiority. What’s more, this human propensity toward othering and superiority has been weaponized for the sake of greed. People will do anything to get ahead.

The Gospel

With that in mind, let’s take a look at our Gospel for today. We pick up right where we left off last week. If you remember last week, in Jesus’ first act of his public ministry in Luke, Jesus is in the synagogue in Nazareth, and reads from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, to bring good news to the poor, release to the oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind, a year of the LORD’s favor.”

And then he sits down and says: “Today, this is fulfilled in your hearing.”

He's saying, the Spirit of the LORD is upon him, and upon us, and that his and our purpose is the flourishing of God's hopes and dreams for all of society. For all. We, like Jesus and his listeners, ended that passage last week full of hope and expectation and promise. And THEN...

(So often when reading the scriptures, it feels like we could use sound effects. You know, like the scene change tone from Law and Order? Dong-dong.)

Everyone is amazed by Jesus, and then...He says, "You know this isn't all about you, right?" Jesus, the local boy, who had just read the scriptures so nicely, who had just said, "I'm going to make my life about helping people," then clarifies. Using two different examples, one of the Prophet Elijah, the other of the Prophet Elisha, Jesus describes times that God showed favor to non-Israelites. This stopped Jesus' hearers dead in their tracks. They had just been murmuring about how sweet it was that he spoke so well, how they remembered when he was just a boy at Joseph's knee. But wait a minute. What do you mean? You're here to proclaim a year of favor TO THEM? You're saying you're here to create a society that will benefit those outsiders, not just the people who look like us and talk like us and worship like us?

Two thousand years, and not much has changed because people still fall for this othering. People still choose cruelty rather than character. We're in the current mess we're in because all too often, people would rather feel superior than put efforts into building a society based on mutual flourishing.

So, if our Gospel is setting up the toxicity of this all too human dynamic of othering and superiority, our reading from 1 Corinthians offers the antidote.

"Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable;
it keeps no record of wrongs;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth."

(1 Cor 13:4-6)

Early in my ministry here, I preached on this passage, telling the story of a teenager who was smitten with someone who wasn't treating her very well. The story goes that her mother suggested she replace "love" with her crush's name in this passage, and ask herself if it was true. Are they patient and kind or are they envious or boastful or arrogant or rude? Do they insist on their own way? I also suggested that inserting your own name could result in a pretty well calibrated moral compass.

Heather is patient.
Clay is kind.
Gail is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
Sandy does not insist on her own way.
Beth is not irritable.
Jammie keeps no record of wrongs.
Kathy hopes all things.
Denise bears all things.
Zoe does not rejoice in wrongdoing.
Jason rejoices in the truth.

This is still a worthy application of this text. But given the state of our world, I'd like to suggest taking it in another direction. Our Gospel and today's headlines dovetail into a mosaic of human cruelty, a race away from mutual flourishing and toward brutality. Over and over again what I'm hearing from you is not only incredulity but real and founded terror.

Last week, I reminded you that the church's role is to bind up and heal the wounded, protect the vulnerable, and affect change in such a way that ever more people are experiencing God's love and justice and mercy and grace. Of course, your question is "How?" Quite frankly, I don't know. The fissures in our social fabric are so monumental this time that simply going back to the old well of encouraging active citizenship based in Christ's values isn't going to cut it this time. We need not only new wine; we need new wineskins.

We need to not only affect the systems that have gotten us to this point, we need to affect the hearts that are perpetrating this iniquity. And to do that, we need to take a page from our Gospel reading and look outside of our usual sources. Jesus warned against tribalism and reminded his listeners that God acted with mercy and compassion and grace outside of their expected norms. What I'm tasking you with from today's scriptures, then, is to seek wisdom and insight and fresh perspective from a new source, maybe even an unlikely source. If you're an intellectual, dive into some award-winning young adult literature to give yourself some new eyes. If you're a dyed-in-the-wool Christian, explore the spiritual aspects of yoga and meditation. If your role is typically sitting on the sidelines, find a volunteer opportunity in which you regularly interact with affected people. In short, expand your sources of wisdom and insight, and do so all while holding on to love as your axis, love as the pole that will keep you oriented, love that will continually remind you of both your purpose and your goal.

Conclusion

The cold hard reality is it's pretty bleak out there, and the forecast is that it's going to get bleaker. In a recent column, Dan Savage concluded:

"During the darkest days of the AIDS Crisis, we buried our friends in the morning, we protested in the afternoon, and we danced at night. The dance kept us in the fight because it was the dance we were fighting for. It didn't look like we were going to win then and we did. It doesn't feel like we're going to win now but we could. Keep fighting, keep dancing."

Savage says it doesn't look like we're going to win now, but we could. I have more faith than that. Right now, it doesn't look like we're going to win, but we are going to. Darkness cannot overcome light. Hatred cannot defeat love. But the triumph of love is going to take work. So gird yourself. Steel yourself against the temptation to the false feeling of superiority that comes from tribalism and othering. Seek the new wisdom from outside of your current canon that will broaden your perspective and provide a different path forward. And in all of this, hold love as your core, understand love to be your source and summit. Friends, love does indeed win, but it's not going to do so without our help.

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1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, Luke 4:21-30
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