

A Sermon on Loving Our Enemies by Teresa Ramsey



The seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

February 20, 2022

Several weeks ago, as I was reading “Merton’s Palace of Nowhere” by James Finley, I was so inspired that I thought I would share what I learned in a future sermon and so I signed up. Reading the selections for the various Sundays listed in the lectionary, the gospel for today jumped out as just right for this purpose. I am going to share about the liberal Christianity of Thomas Merton, to which I aspire as well as the very different mystical spirituality of Teresa of Avila aka Teresa of Jesus, two very different yet uniquely inspiring Christian authors. Then, I will discuss my reflections on

today's gospel reading in which Jesus describes the qualities of God, urges us to emulate them, and why it is for our own good that we do so.

First, a prayer: Holy One, to You all hearts are known, and no secrets hidden, please guide my thoughts in such a way that those who may benefit from hearing them may receive them.

Lately, I have been on a spiritual reading binge. A reader, I am usually drawn to novels or poetry, but in this season of life, I have gravitated to mystics, that is, to those who believe in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect. My two favorites recently are Thomas Merton (*The Sign of Jonas*, a continuation of the *Seven Storey Mountain*, and James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*), and Teresa of Avila (*The Way of Perfection* and *The Book of Her Life*). As individuals, the two authors could not be more different. To speak the language of duality, one is Male, the other female; one is rather contemporary, the other, from the 15th century. Both "catholic", one is a liberal Christian, the other was a strict party-line traditional Catholic who was both monitored and censored by the catholic church at the time of the Inquisition (i.e., quite "orthodox". They are nonetheless alike in their dedication to the spiritual practices of reading scripture and other spiritual writings, regular prayer, silent meditation, and seeking God in the stillness. Clearly, God was the center of their lives. Also clear, is that God spoke to each of them personally, and they each had an experiential knowledge of God. To me, the astonishing part is that their religious views are worlds different. Teresa believed in the catholic story of degrees of sin, penance, temptation by the devil, and a punishing God. To Teresa, heaven could be earned by a pious life. Teresa had little formal education, more of the elementary school

variety. Merton was highly educated, an ordained priest, spoke several languages, and was a renowned author during his lifetime. Although he fully embraced the liturgy and religious trappings of the Catholic Church, he rejected the story of the punishing God, and believed that our "true self" is called to union with God, where all things are one.

What is one to make of such disparate, yet authentic holy experiences? What I conclude from reflecting on this, is that the doctrine one believes is of little consequence, at least in the details. We are each called to an experiential relationship with God that is totally unique to us and is not shared by any other person, although there may be similarities. God is found in communion with Them, not through any doctrine, dogma, or otherwise. We are called by Love to love, although we seem collectively unable to meet this standard.

God inspired both Teresa and Thomas, providing each with important insights into the spiritual dimension. God did not, it seems, attempt to correct whatever religious beliefs they may have had. This makes sense to me. The insistence on a "correct" set of religious beliefs is an outgrowth of a hierarchical church, a domination/control system, and the desire of people to control the narrative. We really don't seem as a species to be able to grasp the intricacies of the Divine.

I regularly work with the idea of a "God of my understanding" or "misunderstanding if you will, when I assist a sponsee coming into a 12-step program. Although the founders of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) were clearly Christian in their beliefs and practices, they believed, as I do, that one can be in communion with God if one keeps an open mind, prays, meditates, and clears away the things like fear, resentments, and past harms that block us from the sunlight of the spirit. I have been blessed to observe many times as God makes Their presence known to a previously agnostic or atheistic woman. In

AA this is called a "spiritual awakening". In case you are wondering, even though one awakens, one can return to sleep, or forgetfulness if you will, unless one maintains their spiritual condition.

I was hoping that in the tons of spiritual reading that I have been doing, I would find a formula, a strategy, or a technique that would allow me to be transformed into a higher spiritual level. The awareness of often I am less spiritual than I want to be is so very painful. Foolish I have been, for no one, no practice, no technique can really transform me. I lack the power. One thing that both Thomas and Teresa agree on is that there is no program for mystical seeing. It is a gift. It cannot be earned or expected. So much for my desire to find "the answer". I admit that. it was naïve. God does not want to be pinned down. We can search and get glimpses, but the veil is there. The closest I have been able to come to a stronger communion with the Divine is during silent meditation, silent retreats, on pilgrimage, or in nature. Perhaps one day, if They choose, I will be able to catch glimpses of Them in all the people around me also. If so, it will be a gift.

Now, let us look at the rich gospel from Luke, chapter 6 verses 27-38 which addresses love of others (including enemies), the admonition to not judge, and mercy. Could this message be timelier? For me, the last several years have held lots of temptations to identify enemies and to judge them and others as well as countless examples of what no mercy looks like. I have often failed to maintain a loving attitude, have judged a lot, and at times shown little mercy. I have been painfully aware of missing the mark here. I admit that I have obsessed over the wrong thinking of certain people and groups, and then acted worse myself. The result is the opposite of the serenity that I seek. I have prayed and meditated in order to release my opinions and judgements and to accept the "others" as equal children of God, seeking a way to love them, to see the spark of God within. On good days, I can accept that a

piece of God surely lives within people whom I don't understand just as much as God dwells within me. Other days, I can't imagine how God can love any of us.

When I first read this gospel, I imagined that Jesus was instructing us on a *quid pro quo* that we should follow. That is, be merciful, just as your father is merciful, I interpreted to mean that if you are merciful then the father will be merciful. But that is not what Jesus says. Jesus is urging us to imitate our Father in whose image we are made. Aspirational, right? Not exactly. You see, Jesus is called the Great Physician. This is because He knows how we are made, how we work. His advice on this occasion is very practical. My own experience, illuminated by the principles of the 12-step programs I practice, is that if I am not merciful to others, I cannot be merciful to myself. It is a kind of natural law. You reap what you sow, not later, but now. I don't know about you, but I can be quite harsh with myself. The worst, right? I want to avoid that. Compassion for others pays an immediate dividend in increased compassion for me. I guess we were made that way.

As for Jesus admonition to love my enemies, it looks hard, at first glance. I can't claim to have real "enemies", yet there are people who irritate me, and I have experience from the 12-step programs with what to do about it. First, if I reflect upon the why certain people irritates me, it doesn't take long to realize that it is because those people are acting in the way my shadow self-acts. In other words, they are doing what I don't want to admit to myself that I do also. You know, being selfish, rude, dominating a conversation etc. Easier to blame someone else than look at myself. Easier, but not profitable.

I want to share a story of how I learned to love my enemies in the hope that it may help you too. I had a very acrimonious divorce over 20 years ago. I hated my ex. It was poisonous. A few years later, I entered a 12-step program. Part of my recovery included looking at my part of the relationships in

which I had resentments and after uncovering my part, making amends to the other party. I told my sponsor that I would make amends to everyone but my ex-husband. She just smiled. You see, she knew that I would change my mind when the time came. She was right in that thought, although I had to pray for quite awhile for willingness. The other practice recommended to me, is that I pray at least once a day for my ex-husband to receive all the things I wanted for myself, like enough of everything, good health, peace of mind, friends, love, self-esteem and so on. At first I prayed with gritted teeth, but eventually I was released from my antipathy for him. Frankly, it was a relief to let it go. Today, I say a prayer daily for anyone I may feel negative about before I meditate. This is the prayer for loving friendliness that I learned from a Buddhist meditation book. "May my adversaries be well, happy, and peaceful. May no harm come to them, may no difficulty come to them, may no pain come to them. May they always meet with success." [1] I pray for myself, family, friends, and strangers also. It helps me expand my heart.

Next Jesus admonishes us to "do not judge lest ye be judged" and "forgive and you will be forgiven". Jesus does not say that the one responding to our judgement or forgiveness is God. I believe that we cannot spare ourselves from ourselves when we judge or refuse to forgive. The judging part of myself I call the "critical parent". Sure, she judges you, but she judges me more harshly. Through a 12-step program, I am learning to replace the "critical parent" with a "loving parent" who is compassionate to me and, you can guess, to others. Same with forgiveness. If I refuse to forgive you, I won't be able to forgive myself. Try it and see. We are the very last one we can forgive. I am not sure why, but we are made that way. Jesus is telling us how we work when he tells us to not judge and to forgive.

Last, Jesus admonishes us to give, and it will be given to us. Again, I suggest it will be given to us by us. Things

like compassion, patience, and tolerance....when we give, don't we also receive?

Today's gospel contains the "Golden Rule" which we all learned as children and still struggle to demonstrate as adults. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you is the command. Reflecting on this command, I become aware of just how much I struggle with this. This is not a *quid pro quo*; I am to do this knowing that it won't be reciprocated. Here, I come face to face with my shadow self. We all are creatures of darkness and light. God loves us anyway. We see ourselves as separate beings, but we are not. We are connected to God, to each other, and to nature. In that regard what we do unto others we do to ourselves; that is the heart of the matter. Simple but not easy. As children, many of us were instructed that God is a judging God, demanding justice before love. Yet that is not the God that Jesus describes. We all miss the mark at times. That is what being human is.

To quote James Finley, "Jesus gives us the Spirit and so makes us one with God. This gift reveals the deeper dimensions of our love for others and empowers us to reach these dimensions. It is the Spirit that allows us to see that to love another is to love Christ."[\[2\]](#) We are one with each other, one with God and one with all of creations. Jesus, the great teacher, teaches us how we are made in God's image and how our psyches operate in this world.

I would like to end with one of my favorite poems by Rumi:

BEYOND

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing
There is a field
I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass
The world is too full to talk about
Ideas,*

*Language,
Even the phrase "each other"
Doesn't make any sense*

Oh, even though there is no secret for self-transformation and while we are not entitled to any result, one can prepare by emptying oneself out as Jesus did. And then waiting.

[\[1\]](#) Bhante Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Somerville, Massachusetts, Wisdom Publications, 2011), p.181.

[\[2\]](#) James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1978), p. 38.