Seventh Sunday of the Year, C

St. Mary’s Riverside, 2022

Jesus is remember as saying

many outlandish things:

like suggesting that the poor are blessed

or that God loves sinners

or that we are actually supposed to love our neighbor

As much as we love ourselves.

But on the preposterous scale

The pinnacle of fantastical Christian teaching

Almost verging on the ridiculous

Has to be today’s passage from Luke

That not only instructs us to love neighbors

But actually to love our enemies.

This is the Mount Everest of Jesus instructions

That few of us feel equipped much less inclined to climb.

One of the hurdles to understanding, much less embracing

This apparently scandalous instruction

Is the way many societies, including our own,

Have reduced “love” to a feeling or buzz word.

Various advertising blitzes have confirmed

That a love induced state can be achieved

By acquiring the correct goods …

so Johnson & Johnson products

are peddled as “the language of love”[[1]](#endnote-2)

Dole’s fruit bowls are marketed as a secret love language[[2]](#endnote-3)

And diet coke is the self-declared

universal language of love.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Though the height of absurdity might be

the fast food commercial from South Africa

with grown adults singing that

the object of their love is their “Bunny Chow.”[[4]](#endnote-5)

To suggest that many contemporary societies

Have trivialized the language of “love”

Is certainly an understatement.

It is clear from today’s challenging Jesus-speak, however,

That for the Only begotten love is not a feeling

but a call to action.

The Greek word that Jesus employs is “agapate” from “agape”

An imperative form that commands a commitment

To the highest good of another.

This is precisely not a feeling, which can never be commanded,

But a call to action that can be mandated.

The manifestation that we have heeded this command

is a trinity of responses:

Do good, bless, and pray for adversaries and rivals

Opponents and antagonists of every stripe.

We get a partial illustration of the action demanded of such love

In the tale of David from our first reading.

David, who is perceived as a rival to Saul, Israel’s first king,

Is being pursued by Saul and his armies

And this slayer of Goliath has not one

But two opportunities to kill the King

one of which we hear about today.

But David does not step into the quagmire of revenge

And slay the one who wishes him dead

But rather enacts a line from today’s psalm,

Which the bible actually ascribes to his authorship:

He is both just and merciful.

Contemporary science has revealed

Just how complicated is the practice of revenge.[[5]](#endnote-6)

The thirst for retribution is timeless,

From Homer to Hamlet to contemporary politics

and our own justice system.

The colloquialism “just desserts”

suggests that revenge is sweet

But as some psychologists note

much of its sugar is confined to the coating.

The actual execution of revenge carries a bitter cost

Of time, motion, physical energy and even lives.

Behavioral scientists have discovered that

Instead of quenching hostilities

Revenge can prolong the unpleasantness of the original offense

And that bringing harm upon an offender

Is not enough to satisfy a person’s vengeful spirit.

Thus, instead of delivering justice

Revenge often creates a cycle of retaliation

Often fuels aggression

And usually tastes much more sour than advertised.

So, even from a psychological perspective

Revenge is not a healthy move for individuals or society

And the future king David in the first reading

Is to be applauded, at least in this passage,

From not giving into this pervasive human instinct:

notably not shared by any other living species.

Nonetheless, it is a huge leap from the heathy choice

of revenge-abandonment

To loving one’s enemies

And the equally problematic directive

To give to everyone who asks of you what they want,

Which, if taken literally would require

every parent with child in tow

Wandering through the supermarket or toy store

to fulfill every toddler’s wish

for unhealthy treats and unaffordable toys.

In Jesus time, it was commonly held that

you should help your friends and harm your enemies.[[6]](#endnote-7)

Jesus, however, rejects this form of ethical mutuality.

As the biblical scholar Gerhard Lohfink summarizes

if everything depends solely on precisely calculated mutuality

on “you help me then I will help you”

the world is not only devoid of grace

it lacks any kind of charm or beauty.

Now I have to say that I was not expecting that last move

And cannot remember reading any other biblical scholar

Who links this passage about loving our enemies with beauty;

Yet, such an unforeseen turn could foreshadow

Unexpected wisdom.

While beauty attracts us,

Sometimes prompting us to act generously

Other times irrationally

It is also frequently dismissed as expendable

In our practical minded culture.

Beauty’s dismissability is evidenced by so many of our cityscapes

Textured in concrete and asphalt

Punctuated by stolid parking garages

unsightly signs and billboards

and many blighted neighborhoods

with too little public art, gracious structures

Or welcoming landscapes.

On the other hand, true beauty nurtures justice and dignity.

In the words of the anti-apartheid theologian John de Gruchy

*The beautiful serves transformation by supplying images that contradict the inhuman … provid[ing] alternative transforming images to those of oppression. We are … redeemed by such beauty, for art does not simply mirror reality but challenges its destructive and alienating tendencies.[[7]](#endnote-8)*

The invitation to love our enemies from an ethics of beauty

Does not command or even presume

That we envision our adversaries and rivals

As charming, graceful, or in any way pleasing to the eye.

Ratherthe Jesus imperative demands

That our actions towards them are an exercise

Of the Christian arts

That our respect for them be a reflection

of God’s own graciousness

and that our doing good, blessing and praying

draw back the curtain on the very beauty of God.

In 2015 Paris experienced one of the worst incidents of terrorism

When over 130 people were killed

And more than 350 injured in coordinated attacks

Days later, a reporter for *Le Petit Journal*

Interviewed 6 year old Brandon sitting on his father’s knee

Outside of a theater, the site of one of the attacks.

As people were laying flowers and lighting candles

To honor the victims.

You might have seen the short clip

Viewed by more than 11 million since it was posted.[[8]](#endnote-9)

The reporter asks the 6 year old

if he understands why terrorists attacked Paris.

In simple but crisp French he replies

“Yes, because they’re very very very mean,"

"The bad guys aren’t very nice. And we really have to be careful because we have to change homes.”

*Il faut changer maison.*

His dad reassures him, saying, “No, don’t worry, we don’t have to change homes. France is our home.”

*C’est la France notre maison*

"But there are bad guys, Daddy!" the boy says.

"Yes, but there are bad guys everywhere," his father counters.

"They have guns, they can shoot at us because they have guns and are bad," the boy continues.

"Well, they have guns, but we have flowers," the father says.

*Nous avons des fleurs*

The boy turns around to look at some of the flowers behind him.

"But flowers don’t do anything," the boy argues.

"See all the flowers?" his dad asks.

"They’re to fight against the guns."

"Are they there to protect?" the boy asks.

*C’est pour proteger?* " - and the father says “exactly”

And then the pre-schooler asks: “The candles too?"

"yes," his dad says. "

It’s to not forget those who left us yesterday.”

“The flowers and the candles," the boy concludes,

"they’re there to protect us."

*Oui ... oui ... oui*

Beauty may seem a fragile, even futile weapon

Against brutalization and violence

But it was the terrible beauty of the only-begotten

In his unforgettable embrace of enemies on Golgatha

That defeated death, and brought life to the world.

We ritualized with candles and flowers

Beautiful music and gracious spaces

So that we too can be bearers of that Christ-beauty

Which rejects the grotesque, mean spirited and violent

And embraces a generosity

That reveals the artistry and grace

Of God’s loving spirit.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ0wS02riqE> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdwsYgz87eE> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PirlCTYwoL4> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APMeMxhY18o> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Much of what follows on revenge here comes from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-complicated-psychology-of-revenge> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. What follows is from Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What he Wanted, Who he was* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 195-199. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 199-200. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpHJ-0BOdPI> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)