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## From the Pulpit: February 20, 2022

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time—Presidents' Day Weekend

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 6:27–36

### *The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time, VII: The Church of Not Being Horrible*

The American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called Jesus the impossible possibility, just beyond our reach. During this liturgical time of pandemic we've been looking at the early ministry of Jesus to see how we might be better Christians.

*“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

The first brick for this pub in St. Albans, England, was laid in the year 793, centuries before England became England. It is 1,229 years old. It has survived the invasion of William the Conqueror; famine after famine; the Black Plague, which may have killed half of Europe's population; several civil wars; and two World Wars. But it could not survive the coronavirus. It recently shut down for lack of customers, maybe for good.<sup>1</sup>



For me that story became emblematic for how much stress this pandemic has placed on almost every realm of our common lives together. So if you're beating yourself up about how poorly you're coping with all this, just stop it, OK? It's hard. There's no shame in under coping, but there is shame in lashing out because of it.

Many of us are behaving badly. School Board meetings devolve into shouting matches and character assassination. Relatives of COVID patients in ICU's scream at doctors and nurses and tell them that if their relative dies, it will be **their fault**. Pedestrian deaths have skyrocketed because people are driving faster and more recklessly.

Of course, the pandemic didn't invent bad behavior. That goes way back. All the way to the Garden of Eden.

Oracle Founder Larry Ellison described his leadership style as MBR—Management by Ridicule. He says, “You've got to be good at intellectual intimidation and rhetorical bullying.”<sup>2</sup>

So during the season of Epiphany at Kenilworth Union Church, we've been studying the early ministry of Jesus to see if we can learn anything from him about being better citizens and neighbors.

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*The Washington Post*, February 7, 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> Annabelle Timsit, “England's Oldest Pub, Possibly 1,229 Years Old, Shuts Doors due to Coronavirus Hardships,”

<sup>2</sup> Emma Goldberg, “No More Working for Jerks,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2022.

So what do you think about that passage I just read? Are you intimidated? I am. The thing about that passage I just read is that it contains some of the **easiest** and also the **hardest** of Jesus' sayings.

The easiest saying is The Golden Rule. In verse 31, Jesus says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That is kindergarten religion. No one disagrees with that saying and almost everyone at least **tries** to follow it, except for a few American politicians, Russian dictators, and Olympic figure-skating coaches.

The famed Rabbi Hillel the Elder, a rough contemporary with Jesus of Nazareth, says that The Golden Rule is the entire Torah, the totality of the Jewish religion; the rest is just commentary.

Sometimes I wish Jesus had quit right there, but no, he has to keep going to give us the really hard stuff, almost impossible stuff. "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek; if someone takes your coat, give him your shirt too."

You remember that scene from *Les Misérables* when Jean Valjean is arrested for stealing the silverware from the Bishop of Digne? The gendarmes lead Valjean away in chains, but the Bishop chases them down and he says, "Monsieur Valjean, you forgot the silver candlesticks. Take the candlesticks." "Do that," says Jesus.

And then after that long litany all those unreasonable expectations, Jesus gives us the *coup de grâce*, the apex of impossibility. "Be merciful, as God is merciful." Act like God, Jesus? Really? St. Matthew has his own version of this Jesus saying, and he makes it even harder. Matthew says, "Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Perfect?

But you see why Jesus feels compelled to offer something higher and harder than "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The shapely symmetry of The Golden Rule is its reciprocity. That is to say, in the human community, we have an unspoken contract with each other: If **you** will treat **me** as I want to be treated, then **I** will treat **you** as **you** want to be treated. That's very shapely and reciprocal and symmetrical.

"The easiest saying is The Golden Rule. In verse 31, Jesus says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That is kindergarten religion. No one disagrees with that saying and almost everyone at least tries to follow it"

The thing is, Jesus knows that this reciprocity will frequently fracture in our daily encounters with one another. Many, many people, many, many times, including me, many, many times, are failing to honor the unspoken contract. Some bosses practice MBR—Management by Ridicule.

So Jesus teaches us what to do when bad actors unleash their chaos. He says, "Don't respond to the bad actor as a human being would respond. Show the bad actor the same mercy God has always shown you."

And you know personally, existentially, intimately, the long, patient unflinching mercy of the Lord. Your entire life has been **washed** with the tender mercies of our longsuffering God.

"The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. Mercy is above this sceptred sway; it is enthronèd in the hearts of kings; it is an attribute of God Godself."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene i.

“Be merciful as your Father is merciful.” The thing about Jesus’s stricture is that it is both impossible and essential. We **can’t** do it, but we **must**, or life will disintegrate into the mobocracy of the last two years. It is the impossible possibility.

We must live into Jesus’ inconceivably lofty expectation of us. It is a goal deliberately impossible so that we might catapult beyond our own mediocrity into a life more beautiful than we ever would have dreamed on our own. We never get there, but at least there is that lofty goal to stretch toward: “to dream the impossible dream, to reach the unreachable star.”

Prominent Evangelical pastor John Pavlovitz knows that being merciful like God is an impossible ideal. His expectations are more modest. He wrote the book *If God Is Love, Don’t Be a Jerk*.

John says all he wants to do is start a new church called The Church of Not Being Horrible. This church doesn’t have any doctrines, no catechism, just a simple mission statement: don’t be horrible.

Some of you know my friends Phil and Linda McWhorter. Some of you went to Israel with them. Some of you went to Scotland with them. You can tell from the name McWhorter that Phil is of Scottish heritage. Linda and Phil were born and raised in the small town of Argyle (population 3,688), New York, about halfway between Saratoga Springs and Lake George, in the foothills of the Adirondacks.

Argyle is as old as the United States, 1786. You can tell by the name Argyle that the town was settled by Scots immigrants in the eighteenth century. The names on the mailboxes and barns are all MacDonald and MacDougal and Mackintosh. Argyle is all strict, dour Presbyterians who work hard, pay their bills, incur no debt, and expect others to do the same.

Linda’s father Les farmed an apple orchard and owned a gas station in Argyle. Bernie was Les’ assistant at the gas station for something like 20 years. Bernie had seven children to feed and a wife of legendary surliness.

One day at the gas station, Les noticed a shortfall in the receipts for the day, or the week, or the month, whatever. As you can guess, selling gasoline is an exact science. You know how many gallons you sell in a day and therefore how much cash should be in the till. Les discovers a shortfall. There are only two employees at the gas station. It has to be Bernie.

The next morning, Les calls Bernie into his office, sits him down, and says, “Bernie, there’s some cash missing. I know who has it. We need to make a change around here. It looks to me as if I’m not paying you enough. You need a raise.”

Bernie broke The Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule won’t work between Les and Bernie. Les needed to try something else. He needed to be as merciful to Bernie as God had been to him. Sometimes we do achieve the Impossible Possibility.

“Be merciful as your Father is merciful.” The thing about Jesus’s stricture is that it is both impossible and essential. We can’t do it, but we must, or life will disintegrate into the mobocracy of the last two years. It is the impossible possibility.”

**—Prayers of the People—**  
**By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

God of light and love,  
we follow you.  
Into the illuminated day,  
we pursue your timeless presence,  
risking the pause it takes to notice and grasp  
the divine love that is ever-present.  
We need you, O God,  
in the depth of February  
where light returns day by day  
and birdsong gives us hope.  
We need you as we walk the frozen earth,  
dreaming of the moment when tulips push up  
from the dirt,  
sweet and yellow.  
We need you as we walk this life:  
its puzzles and slant difficulties.  
We find ourselves not knowing the way  
needing you to take the lead  
point us down your path home.  
We find ourselves in the valley of  
the shadow of death,  
anxiety flared and worry dancing across our day.  
Be with us.  
Accompany us.  
Lead us.  
Usher us forth into the song of love that issues  
from your divine shadow.

We pray too for the worries of nation and globe.  
For the ache of the earth as she bears rising  
temperatures, raging fires, deforested landscapes,  
unrelenting human harm.

For the risk of war, and the radical hope that lion  
might lay down with the lamb and sword made  
into gardening tool, resting in the hope that we  
might not practice war anymore. Give us a way  
toward peace. Guide us. Steer us through.  
For the hardship of disease, for our hospital  
workers, for those who care for the suffering. Be  
with us, O God.

Wrap us in the light of your love.  
Give us your goodness.  
Create in us a new kindness and gentleness  
When we cry out, hear us O God.  
And in the safe silence of this Sanctuary  
hear the prayers of our hearts.

Our Father.... Amen.

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purposes in any medium, provided you include  
a brief credit line with the author's name (if  
applicable) and a link to the original post.