

Psalm 27

Triumphant Song of Confidence

Of David.

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold^[a] of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.

⁶Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!

¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

Luke 13 The Lament over Jerusalem

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” ³²He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me,^[c] ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when^[d] you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

“Friend of Pharisees and Sinners Alike”

Luke 13: 31-35; Psalm 27

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In a recent New York Times article, columnist David Brooks asks the question, “What is the core problem facing America today?” Then he answers his own question by saying, “It is division: The growing gaps between rich and poor, rural and urban, educated and less educated, black and white, left and right.” (David Brooks, *An Agenda for Moderates: The policy implications of Love Your Neighbor*, New York Times, February 25, 2019)

A second question in the article addresses the first, “What big idea counteracts division, fragmentation, alienation?” And the answer he says, can be found in both Leviticus and Matthew: Love your neighbor.

On those two questions, I find myself vigorously nodding along in agreement. The polarization in this country, as well as around the world, is deeply troubling to me, and I wonder if we can find our way toward an understanding of our common humanity by practicing what we preach and cultivating love for our neighbors. But I dare say that Brooks, as good of a writer as he can be, is not telling us any new news here. The divisions that drive person against person have been evident since Leviticus and Matthew were written down in the same sort of context where definitive gaps also existed between rich and poor, rural and urban, educated and less educated, slave and free. The political alliances may shift and change, but the frustration remains the same. Rather than finding complexity and nuance in the lives of our neighbors, we can and we do often reduce them to whether they are like us, or not like us.

“Love your neighbor” doesn’t leave so much wiggle room for determining first if that neighbor is like us or not. It doesn’t ask us to love the person who has an equivalent bank account, or who has the same skin color, or who voted for the same candidates in the last election. Quite naturally it seems, we are drawn already to people who share a similar outlook on the world, and sometimes those people do live on our street, or at least share the same zip code. Nevertheless, the command to love all of them, those pesky neighbors, whoever they are, leaves us wondering if Jesus really meant it, if Hebrew law really prescribed it, and then if we have to try and live up to it, what does that even look like?

In reading the gospel lesson for this week, I had one of those “aha” moments of “OH, this is what love looks like.” I saw something there that I really hadn’t paid attention to before. You see, for so much of the gospel, the four chapters of scripture particularly dedicated to the Jesus story, in them, the Pharisees are portrayed as the “bad guys,” right? They are the foil for Jesus, the ones who are constantly challenging him, annoying him, and sometimes even threatening him. We are taught that so clearly in Christian tradition, that we can easily miss what the text actually says.

At the very beginning of this passage, we are told that some Pharisees come to Jesus and tell him, “Get out of town. Herod is trying to kill you.” Wait. What? It’s the *Pharisees* who warn Jesus about Herod. If they didn’t care about him, why would they do that? Then that means that the rest of this short speech of Jesus is directed, specifically to the Pharisees who are his friends, the ones who want him to be safe.

And Jesus sees this as an opportunity to address division in the house of faith to which he belongs. Though he ultimately heeds their warning and leaves town to do more of his ministry of casting out demons and performing cures, he also sends a message to Herod through them starting with, “Tell that fox what I’m doing.” Jesus doesn’t seem nearly as concerned about his own safety as they do, so

he proceeds to tell them what has happened to all the prophetic voices who have gone before.

Outside of Jerusalem, they are safe. Inside of Jerusalem, it's certain death. For me, this is a mark of Jesus noticing division in his own time. Those who lived outside the city could hear the prophetic truth because they were in fact outsiders, the poor and rural country folk and fishermen who would be pleased to see a little more justice rolling down like water. But inside the city, prophetic voices are a terrible disruption to the status quo. Jerusalem big shots had no time for prophets. So, whether you hear prophesy as a blessing for the future or as a challenge to your way of life often times depends upon where you are located. What are the forces that drive you?

The difficult part to sift through, both then and now is to figure out which divisions are neutral, more like preferences or circumstances, and which divisions carry the weight of something ACTUALLY being right or wrong, good or bad, loving or NOT SO LOVING. Living in the country outside of Jerusalem or living in the city of Jerusalem is likely no different than living on multiple acres in Beaverdam or in the heart of Virginia's state capital in Richmond. Lives will be different – but there are benefits and liabilities to both lifestyles. I know it's not typically what we've been told, BUT I think Jesus had friends who were Pharisees. In fact, in the very next chapter, we read about Jesus being invited over for Shabbat dinner at a leader of the Pharisees home. Jesus of course doesn't make a great dinner guest because he complains about how the other guests choose their seats and then tells the host that he should offer more hospitality to those who can't return the favor rather than surrounding himself with the "important people." Then, his rewards would be far greater in heaven. Being friends with Jesus certainly may have been trying at times. And yet, he isn't summarily dismissive of hanging out with Pharisees.

The Pharisees know Jesus. They argue with him – but then again that was expected. It was about learning and growing in the faith. And yet, the frequent gossip about Jesus was about him hanging

out with the other side. He spent more of his time in the country of Galilee making friends with sinners and miscreants of all sorts. Jesus made friends with sides who distrusted each other. Today he would have friends in urban centers and in towns of under a thousand people. He would know people who had wealth and political influence, and he would befriend the homeless. He would love to know people from all around the world of every different language, background, and worldview.

And yet this notable kind of inclusionary friendship held to a principle that made some on both sides find him difficult. He held both sides, all sides, every single person he dealt with accountable to love. That's the challenge. You can be rich or poor, rural or urban, educated or less educated, black or white, right or left and be guided by love, OR you can be any of those things and fully fueled by hate of those who are not like you. Jesus had no tolerance for those who pointed fingers and judged harshly. He knew when the rich young ruler was too tight with his own money. He knew when the Pharisees were getting over zealous about the rules. And he knew when the fishermen that he hung out with were acting rebellious and bigoted in their own ways. He expected his tax collector friends to act ethically – and no one else did that.

From how I read the *New York Times* article, Brooks goes on to conclude that riding the cultural middle can be an easy place to hide from the bickering sides and do nothing, or it can be a place to stand firmly on the side of love with grace and purpose. It isn't easy to do that – to make a stand that at the same time refuses to vilify the other.

There's another lesson to be learned from this kind of radical friendship. It seems to be the only thing that can take the radical fringes of hate and begin to change perspectives for real. Daryl Davis, an African American musician, has a TED talk called, "Klan we talk?" about why, as a black man, he began to attend KKK rallies. At those rallies he would find someone to get to know with the purpose of attempting to befriend that person. He would share insights, be kind, counter hate with

amazing love, to the point where that Klan member knew at least one black person that he or she couldn't hate anymore. Davis has led more than 200 members out of the Klan in just that way. What a story!

Your hometown, your bank account, the color of the skin, the way you part your hair, none of that matters, right? What matters are your values, and if you truly value love above all else. That's where Jesus was coming from. Jesus loved the Pharisees. I really think he did. I think he even loved the very few of them who ultimately plotted against him and led to his death. That's why this speech rings out with a kind of motherly love that hunkers down in protection over all, ALL the children. Jesus loves us when we are doing good things, and Jesus loves us when our waywardness leads us to horrible thoughts or decisions in our lives. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." It's not Jesus who is unwilling. It is our own unwillingness to stand shoulder to shoulder under his loving protection.

But we can make it our goal, our value, to love as Jesus loved and sometimes intentionally seek friendships with those who are not so much like us. Sometimes we have to start with small steps and move outward. It takes an exceptionally brave black musician to go to a KKK rally to make friends. When I was asked to get the training so I could learn how to befriend people in hate groups, I had to say that I wasn't ready for that. I'm too scared, maybe too judgmental still to have a go at it. But anytime that I am willing to risk caring for someone new, or deepen relationships with those already in my circles, I expand and grow the kind of love that Jesus wanted us all to have. I pray we will all keep at it, and continue to love as Jesus loved – so that even the Pharisees will have a chance at the redemption of their character as people just like us. Amen.