

Luke 6: 27 - 38

02/20/22

Gradye Parsons, the retired Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and a member of Holston Presbytery in East Tennessee, has posted on his Facebook page many articles and pictures of Black Americans who made significant contributions to the quality of our life as a nation. Lewis Howard Latimer who worked for Thomas Edison and wrote the first book on electric lighting. Augusta Savage, born Augusta Christine Fells, a sculptor whose work featured prominently in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. This is Black History month, and Gradye as a proud Tennessean Presbyterian, reminds me that we have much to celebrate, thanking God for the gifts of peoples of various colors from different parts of the world, who overcame unimaginable circumstances and whose contributions we enjoy today.

“The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. impressed these words upon the American conscience in his 1964 Baccalaureate sermon at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.¹ This is a favorite quote of President Obama. The figurative language in Dr. King’s sermon was used in sermon by pre-Civil War preachers in the 1850s, inscribed in stone above the entrance of a Euclid Avenue church in Cleveland, OH, included in a New Year’s Day sermon by Rabbi, Jacob Kohn in Temple Sinai in Los Angeles, CA.² It is heard in our home, as we, Gwen and David, struggle to understand the strange and violent outbreak of white supremacy that grips our nation; but as Gwen and I pay attention to history, has always played a role in our American history from colonial days through of slave holders, through the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws and now voter suppression and no knock warrants. So I must ask on the Sunday of President’s Day weekend: does the moral arc of the universe bend towards justice, really?

Jesus seems to think so in his sermon when he preaches to love your enemy, to bless those who curse you, to generously give more than is asked of you, to be kind to the ungrateful and the evil, to practice merciful godly behavior because God is merciful. If you are in seminary and have the tools and training to read these words in Greek, you find that the Greek words are straightforward. To illustrate, the ‘turning the other cheek’ phrase has less to do with accepting violence and more to do with accepting an insult. It is the type of demeaning slap meant to degrade rather than injure. Offer the other cheek and accept further humiliation teaches Jesus. Allow your coat, and even your shirt, to be borrowed and loan your goods without thought of repayment nor charging any interest at all. Respond graciously to every beggar’s petition and treat those lower down the social ladder as you would want yourself to be treated.

When Jesus said, “Love your enemy”, he spoke in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom of his time, a wisdom born of the Jews dealing with two opposing forces: the first was the faith of Israel that they were a people chosen by God, and as such would be blessed, protected, elevated in God’s eyes and in the life of the world, and the second is that they were often persecuted, pawns in the incessant power plays between Egypt, Assyria, Hittities, Babylonians,

¹ 1964 June 8, Hartford Courant, Wesleyan Baccalaureate Is Delivered by Dr. King by John Craig, Page 4, Hartford, Connecticut. (ProQuest)

² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>

Phoenicians, Amorites and others. They were vulnerable. They prayed with the hope of the Psalmist:

37:1 Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers,

37:2 for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.

37:3 Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.

Their problem was whom to trust. Who had the proper ancestry? Who was their neighbor to whom they would do good, and with whom they would live in security? Over the centuries, a large body of literature, such as this morning's psalm, and writings of rabbis and commentaries on those writings grew. In the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we can read the clearly stated concern for neighbors, and the poor who were to be cared for willingly. There were provisions made for the foreigner who converted to Judaism, for the stranger among them, for the enemy captured in battle.

Jesus does not speak against this Old Testament love ethic. Rather he speaks to the legalism that turned this love in upon itself, and changed the gift of the law of Moses from a covenant of God's chosen servant people to a manifesto of religious and cultural elitism. He cracked the shell of ethnic pride and religious bigotry encased around God's law, and spoke to fulfill the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. He spoke to all who were assembled on the plain that day - the Jew and the non-Jew, the faithful and the faithless, the disciple and the skeptic. No longer was the gift of God's law of love addressed only to the Jew. With Jesus, the law of love became a heart of love, and everyone has a heart; everyone has the potential to love without regret, without regard for status or power or place; everyone that is who has ears to hear that grace is stronger than hate.

We know that Luke will write about Jesus seeking out the last, the least and the lost. This will cost him his life as he is crucified. But on Easter morning, God raised this Jesus from the dead and the itinerant teacher became the Christ, who is the Prince of Peace and Head of the Church. The Church. The Church is where people gather to hear the Word of God. They might gather on a plain in Palestine, in the Amazon jungle of Brazil, in the mountains of Albania, on the coast of Australia, or in Akron, OH, in this magnificent sanctuary! Here the walls soar high as they hold the ceiling and encase the windows letting in the light. Here, the laws of physics support the weight of the building, the laws of electricity power the sound system, the laws of acoustics fill the space with organ music and choral voices. Here we are surrounded by beauty and structure and peace. I imagine the sanctuary as a living metaphor of all creation, governed by the laws of creation as surely as the solar system and Milky Way. This is home for our souls before we enter our one true spiritual home. This is where together we can live that life of love Jesus promises pleases God; or as the Psalmist sang, Here we trust in the Lord and do good.

When the Word of God is heard, then our lives can be lived so differently, lived more like the life Jesus described and less like the life of the world that seeks to kill the spirit, the body, the mind. The moral arc of the universe is long, as Dr. King preached, but my vision is short. I have only been with you a few weeks; I do not "see" you clearly. But with my abbreviated vision, in this short time we have had, I already see . . .

glimmers of grace revealed in relationships. . .

moments of forgiveness in a less than perfect church . . .

the hope for peace that comforts . . .

the willingness to be different from a society of haves/have nots . .

the desire to trust one another, and the stranger who is different . . .

a generosity of time, of talent, and yes, of treasure, that reflects God's mercy.

Here I see that the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice. Amen.