

When I was a child, more than anything else in the world, I wanted to be a Jedi Knight. To wield a lightsaber, move objects with my mind, perform the Jedi mind trick, what could be better than that? As a good Christian boy, I was worried that this desire was misplaced because I believed in Jesus, not the Force, but I so badly wanted the Force to be real. Wouldn't it be amazing if there were an unseen energy field all around us and within us, and awareness of this energy field empowered us to do what was otherwise impossible? Well, in today's reading from Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, Jesus invites us to do the impossible.

This whole section reminds me of Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when he's training to be a Jedi Knight with Yoda. You non-Star Wars fans will have to bear with me. There is a point here. Luke had been moving rocks with his mind as he learns the way of the Force, but when his spaceship sinks into the swamp, he is sure they'll never be able to get it out. Yoda says, "So certain, are you? Always with you it cannot be done...You must unlearn what you have learned." Isn't that great? When it comes to love, judgment, and forgiveness, we must unlearn what we have learned. Yoda invites Luke to move the ship with his mind, to which Luke says, "Alright, I'll give it a try." Yoda responds, "No! Try not. Do, or do not. There is no try." Now, as a child I always thought Yoda was being harsh, expecting too much of Luke too soon, but Yoda is inviting Luke to see the world differently, not from the perspective of his skills and abilities, but instead by connecting him to a power that is greater than himself. So, Luke tries and fails, and then says to Yoda, "You want the impossible." Yoda proceeds to move the ship with his mind, and in astonishment, Luke says, "I don't believe it!" Yoda says, "That is why you fail." When we look at the enormity and the absurdity of loving our enemies, withholding judgment, and indiscriminately forgiving, we can't help but respond to Jesus, "You want the impossible." No one can be expected to do that.

On the surface, Jesus' words are utterly illogical. If we do good to those who harm us, if we allow others to strike us with no fear of retaliation, are we not inviting abusers to continue abusing? Wouldn't a better strategy be to take a self-defense class? Jesus' words seem naïve, but the truth is I don't want to do them. Who does? Turning the other cheek is not the American way. There are more guns now in the United States than there are people, an estimated 120 firearms/100 people. If we wanted to, we could give every child who's born a gun when they leave the hospital, and still have more than enough for everyone. That's a lot of guns, and I'm pretty sure those aren't all used for hunting. Why are there so many weapons of death in the hands of those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ? When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, I'm pretty sure that means don't shoot them.

So, what are we to make of Jesus' words here? How can we call Jesus our Lord and Savior yet so blithely ignore what he tells us to do? For starters, we must recognize is that Jesus is inviting us to an entirely new way of looking at the world with a different level of consciousness. If we receive Jesus' words from our default point of view, then we will never understand him, much less do what he says. That's why he begins, "I say to you who are willing to hear," because he knows many of us are not willing. Being willing to hear means questioning our default settings. When we do that, we see that what Yoda said to Luke isn't harsh. It's just true. Loving one's enemies isn't something you try. It's something you do, or do not do, because trying doesn't get you there.

Have you ever tried to love people that you hate? Do you love the President, or the former President? Do you love the people who stormed the Capital on January 6th? Do you love

Derek Chauvin? How about this, do you love the person who hurt you so badly, the mere thought of them increases your heartrate? We can try all we want, but it doesn't work very well, does it? When you tell yourself, you know I need to stop judging people so much, has that helped you be less judgmental? It doesn't help me. How about doing good? When you try to do good, how long does that last? I feel like I can make it an hour or two, but catch me off guard, increase my stress just a little bit, and I'm back to my normal cranky ways. Trying to be loving, trying to be non-judgmental, and trying to be good feels about as effective as New Year's resolutions. We may go through the motions for a week or even a month, but we all know it doesn't really work.

How do we do without trying? It helps to recognize that Jesus isn't actually telling us what to do, at least not in the way we think he is. He isn't giving a to-do list that every day we need to check off. Jesus is simply describing what life looks like for those who live free of shame and fully forgiven. It's descriptive, not prescriptive because when it comes to this kind of abundant generosity, prescriptions do not work. So, what does work? Jesus gives us a clue when he says, "If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them." He says the same about lending and doing good. But a more literal translation of the phrase, "Why should you be commended" is "What is grace to you?" That's the question Jesus asks three times in this passage, and that's the question we need to be asking ourselves when we are unable to love others: what is grace to you?

If the grace of God means that God saves a lucky few while letting everyone else go to hell, then our love will be anemic and limited. If that's what grace is to you, then you'll never love your enemies. We always imitate the God we believe in, and if God doesn't love God's enemies, then how will we? If we simply love those who love us, then we don't understand what grace really is. Grace isn't about reciprocity and quid pro quos. Grace is God's limitless love for all creation, a love that surrounds us, and penetrates us, and binds us together, a love that is equally poured out on the grateful and the ungrateful, the virtuous and the wicked. When I begin to glimpse a love so vast, then suddenly my small grinch heart begins to grow. I like to think of myself as a good person whose trying his best to love others, but when I'm confronted with the boundless grace of God, then all my efforts seem paltry and impotent. But that's OK. Because instead of making me feel paltry and impotent, grace melts my heart with the force of God's great affection.

Here's what I've discovered as an adult, the Force is real, but it doesn't give us strength to fight people or move objects with our minds. The Force that's real is the boundless grace of God that surrounds and sustains us, empowering us to do the impossible, like loving our enemies, giving generously without strings attached, not judging ourselves and others, to forgive and keep on forgiving. That's what God has done for us and keeps doing for us. To believe this is to do it.

When we bask in the grace that is all around us and within us, in time, love, grace, and mercy just spill out of us. It's not something we try. It's something we do, unself-consciously, when we've been seized by the boundless grace of God. The problem with trying is that whenever we try, we are always beginning with our own strength and effort. That can work with modest, attainable goals like reading more or, eating better, or developing good sleep habits, but when it comes to tackling the giant shark that is loving our enemies, not judging other people, and indiscriminately forgiving, then we're gonna need a bigger boat. And there's

no bigger boat, or table, or any other metaphor we can come up with, than the grace of God. There's room in it for the grateful and the ungrateful, for the virtuous and the wicked, for those who march for Black Lives and for those who marched in Charlottesville, for the trans youth and the homophobic, for you and for me, because the truth is, we are all, all of those things, and God loves us all. Believe in that love, for it never fails.