

A First Century Guide to Etiquette and Modern Manners

Genesis 45:3-11,15; Psalm 37; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

Sunday, February 24, 2019 – The Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

Knox-Metropolitan United Church – Regina, SK – Treaty 4 Territory

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In 2008 Nadia Bolz-Weber,

a 6' tall, tattoo covered former stand-up comic and recovering alcoholic
turned Lutheran pastor

started a church in Denver, Colorado

called the House for All Sinner and Saints.

The people who attended the church were her kind of people –

drag queens, transgender youth, street people,

addicts, depressives,

and people in recovery.

Then in 2011 several things happened –

Nadia was invited to preach at a large Christian rally in Denver,

the Denver Post did an article on her and the House for All Sinners and Saints
and people from the suburbs

started coming to her church to see what it was like and stayed.

Nadia was not happy.

She had been praying that the church would grow,

she had been doing everything in her power to help it grow,

but in her mind when it grew

it would continue to be filled with the same kind of marginal people

it already had.

Nadia was so not happy about the invasion of the suburbanites

that after 3 months of people from the suburbs –

clean-cut, white, middle-aged people,

coming to her church she called a congregational meeting

hoping and trusting that if they heard the stories of the people who had

been

at House for All since the beginning

those suburbanites would understand that her church really wasn't for them

and they would go back to their own churches where they belonged.

It's strange when we have a vision
of the way something should be
and it doesn't turn out that way.

Nadia worked in downtown Denver
and she knew the social rules involved
when dealing with people who lived on the margins of society,
but she had no idea what to do
when middle-aged, white people started showing up.

Every community and society
has social rules and etiquette that people live by
and in Jesus' time the social rules were very strict,
which is why the words we heard him say today
would have sounded completely outrageous
to his original audience.

"Love your enemies," Jesus told his disciples
and the crowd that was there that day.

"Do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you,
pray for those who abuse you."

With these words and the ones that follow
Jesus is telling the crowd to break
just about every rule they know about how to behave.

"If someone strikes you on the cheek," Jesus tells the crowd,
"offer the other also."

Now this seems odd
and not particularly safe,
even to our ears.

Turn the other cheek?

Doesn't that mean they'll hit you again?

Yes and no –

this is where knowing some first century etiquette
comes in handy.

Let me explain,

most of the people that Jesus was talking to
were day labourers, subsistence farmers,
women, children, and people who were too sick to work.

They were the homeless, drag queens, transgender youth, and addicts of their
society –

so if someone were to hit them
it would be with the back of their hand.

In those days

to hit someone with the flat of your palm
meant that you perceived them to be equal with you;
people would also only hit with their right hand –
the left hand was considered unclean.

Think about the physics of this –

someone hits one of the people Jesus is talking to
and uses the back of their hand to do it with,
firmly putting the victim in his or her place.

But, as soon as the victim turns the other cheek

the aggressor has no choice
but to back away or hit with the palm of their hand,
and as soon as the aggressor uses the palm of their hand
they have as good as admitted that they see the victim
as an equal.

Jesus' next words

are not much better on the surface than his advice on turning the other cheek.

“If someone asks for your coat,
give them your shirt as well.”

Giving away a shirt along with a coat

is also turns the table on a power play.

Remember – the people Jesus is talking to
are the poorest of the poor in his world,
they do not have money
and quite possibly have no ability to pay back debts.

So someone who is coming for payment
on a debt
may very well ask for a coat as payment.

But there were very strict rules in Jesus' time:
a lender could not leave a debtor naked at sundown.

By telling the crowd to give up a shirt as well,
Jesus is urging the crowd to take the power into their own hands –
force the lender into an uncomfortable situation,
force them to see the humanity in the person in front of them.

Jesus' original audience would have known about these social practices
and they would have understood
that Jesus was preaching something different here –
he was giving advice
that would take a lot of courage to use,
it would be hard,
but if used it could change the balance of power.

And then Jesus finishes his thought with this:
“Do to others
as you would have them do to you.”

I'm guessing many of us
have heard these words before.

The golden rule permeates religions and philosophies
around the world.

It's a good rule for life –
in fact many of our children learn how to behave in school
based on the principles of the golden rule.

In this particular context, however,
Jesus says it not because he thinks the people in the crowd that day

need to treat each other better,

he says it because he is painting the vision of what the world will be like
when God's kingdom becomes reality.

These words come in the middle
of Luke's sermon on the plain –

Jesus is laying out the foundation of God's vision for the world
and unlike us,
the crowd has not had to wait 7 days
between the first part of Jesus' sermon
and this one.

The first part of Jesus sermon
started with "Blessed are you who are poor,
the kingdom of God is yours."

So the crowd is primed –
they know Jesus is telling them something
about how the world should be,
they know Jesus is telling them
about how God sees the world.

With his words about turning the other cheek and giving your shirt away
he is telling the people in that crowd
that rather than living in a world where they are powerless,
they will be on equal footing with the powerful.

And then he repeats his earlier words –

"Love your enemies,
do good,
and lend with no expectation that you will get anything back."
because the kingdom of God is not just about treating others
the way you want to be treated,
it's about going the beyond that
and treating everyone we meet the way God would treat them.

I will tell you now
that following Jesus' call to love our enemies,
do good to those who hate us

and pray for those who abuse us
is very hard to do
and most of us, even when we can do it,
can't do it for very long.

Think about it for a minute –
think about the last time someone did something
that made you mad.

Have you got it?

Now think about what you did –
did you treat that person God would treat them?

Or did you do something else?

Did you yell at them?

Treat them as unworthy of your respect?

Try to get some measure of revenge for whatever they did?

The reason Jesus preaches a sermons about turning the other cheek
is that we all react that way –

we all find it incredibly difficult

to love our enemies,

do good,

and pray for those who abuse us.

We're going to go back

to Nadia Bolz-Weber and the church meeting she set up
to get rid of the suburbanites who had started coming
to her edgy church for social misfits.

Nadia says that in the weeks leading up to the meeting
the whole things wasn't sitting quite right in her heart,
so she called a friend in St. Paul
who had founded a similar church about 10 years earlier
to complain about the clean-cut, middle-aged people
who were invading her church
and didn't he think that she should tell them to go home.

What her friend told her shocked her,

“Yeah, that really sucks,” he said.

“It’s easy to welcome the stranger in your midst when they look like you,
but it’s much harder when they look like your mom or dad.”

By the time Nadia got to the meeting

she’d had a change of heart and was beginning to be curious

about the people from the suburbs who were coming to House for All.

She started the meeting by telling them what her friend had said to her

about the stranger looking like her mom or dad

and then opened the floor up for stories from the congregation –

no longer hoping that the suburbanites would be driven from their midst,

but truly open to the conversation.

Various people stood up

and talked about what drew them to House for All –

mostly it was that they felt connected to God in that place.

Then Asher, an early member of the congregation, stood up

and told them all,

“As the young transgender kid who was welcomed into this congregation

I’m actually glad there are people here now

who look like my mom and dad.

I can have a relationship with them

that I just can’t have

with my own mom and dad.”

The enemies Nadia thought she saw in her church

were actually following Jesus call

to love each other –

in the midst of what could have been a huge church fight,

an astonishing moment of God’s kingdom shone through instead.

Following Jesus’ words

to love our enemies,

do good,

and pray for those who abuse us
is not easy –
these words still go against the social norms we live with.
And yet, in our world today
social rules and norms are changing at a rapid pace –
so maybe, just maybe,
this is the best time
to truly listen to the words Jesus spoke so many years ago,
maybe this is our time – yours and mine
to truly love our enemies,
do good to others,
pray for those who abuse us,
and experience what happens
when the reality of the kingdom of God
shines through before our eyes.