

What Would Martin Do?  
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
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I have never eaten at the restaurant chain Cracker Barrel. It is not because I don't like their cuisine. I actually harbor a secret love of chicken fried steak. It is not because I don't have access to the restaurant. They are near rest areas off highway ramps all over America and my family has done its share of long haul road trips.

No, I haven't eaten at Cracker Barrel because I won't. I am angry at them.

For much of its existence Cracker Barrel had an explicit anti-gay philosophy and practice toward their employees. LGBTQ employees were regularly harassed and unjustly fired from the stores. Anti-gay rhetoric was openly expressed including from top management.

So concerned folks, including me, boycotted the stores, wrote letters, worked for justice.

And in the early 2000's Cracker Barrel changed. They changed their policies. They publicly announced their turn around. They put in place anti-discrimination practices. Victory for inclusion and justice.

And yet, I still won't go. Why? Because I'm still angry.

The justice seeking response would be to now eat at Cracker Barrel, to support change, hard fought and hard considered change that happened. But I am stuck thinking about Cracker Barrel as my enemy. I literally can't break bread with my enemies, not even my former enemies. Not even that, but those who went through transformative change within themselves and emerged with changed hearts. They transformed and I am left behind stewing in my anger.

Jesus has some clear words for me today.

Pray for your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.  
You say you pray for those who love you? So what? Anyone can do that. It's easy.  
What good is that?  
No I say pray for the ones who hate you and despise you.  
Love your enemies.

I have a long way to go.  
I believe this is one of Jesus' most transformative and most difficult teachings for us. To love those who hate us. To love those who persecute us. To love those we violently disagree with. To love those who would hurt us. To love those who seek our demise.

To love them. And not in some mushy, Hallmark-y way. To love them. To wish them well, not ill. To hold them in the same esteem that we hold our child, our parent, our spouse or partner. To love them as a person created and loved by God. For God loves our enemy unconditionally just as God loves us.

Love is the most powerful force there is. And Jesus tells us it is the only way forward. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said,

“Through violence you may murder a murderer but you can’t murder murder. Through violence you may murder a liar but you can’t establish truth. Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.”  
-Martin Luther King Jr. 1929-1968, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?*

That does not mean we don’t protest, disagree, advocate for justice, march, write letters, share our differing views, and boycott. All the tools of change.

But we have to do so from a place of love. We have to pray for those we seek to change. Not necessarily that their hearts change, but for the sake of our hearts.

I was reading a blog this week by pastor Melissa Bane as she wrestled with Jesus’ words:

“I feel as though I’m struggling between not-hate, and advocating for what I believe to be biblical imperatives. And there are people who disagree with me who could also write that previous sentence with just as much honesty as I did.

“What to do? Well, this blip of a sermonette from Jesus has convicted me to pray. Not just for the things I want to see happen in the areas of justice and peace, but for the people with whom I so deeply disagree.

“Praying for them is so much more difficult than not-hating them. Not-hate is passive; prayer is far more active. I don’t believe for a second that prayer will “change their hearts,” as Christians often say in their prayers about others they are trying to not-hate. But I do believe it will likely change my heart.

“When I pray for someone, I start to see that person as I imagine God does: as a flawed human being made in God’s image. Just like me. Praying won’t make me less convinced of the rightness of justice, but it will help me see the person on the other side as a real person, not as someone I want to defeat. Praying, I think, will make me work harder for justice. It will also likely make my heart a little softer.”

She continues: “For the next week, I’m going to choose one public figure a day—one who I think is really wrong-headed about justice issues—and pray for that person. I expect I will be changed. Not in my convictions, but in my humanity.” 2-13-17 © 2017 Melissa Bane

To pray for our enemies or those with whom we violently disagree is to refuse to dehumanize them. We can’t create straw men and women to then mow down in our anger. We have to hold them in a light of compassion even as we seethe with anger and frustration and even fear. Pray for your enemies says Jesus. Hold them in God’s light. Hold them in your heart the same way you hold the ones you love.

This seems impossible. And maybe it is. But with God all things are possible, remember. The impossible becomes merely extremely and sometimes excruciatingly difficult.

King understood this. He understood that he was choosing a difficult path. As the debates between King and Malcolm X who advocated a more violent uprising, a more direct confrontation of power to oppression, King remained steadfast in non-violent protest, even as those he loved were killed, churches were bombed, lynchings continued. King said no. Love your enemies. Pray for them.

When talking with my son this week he asked what I was preaching on. I quoted Jesus: love your enemies.

He said, “Love your enemies?!What!? I don’t like that!”

Yes, exactly right. We don't like that. It is so, so much harder.

But it the way toward transformative change. Real change. Hard won change. And really, what better way to drive your enemies crazy than to love them. They can't make you un-love them. It is equally difficult to dehumanize the one who is loving you and praying for you. Not in "pray for these poor sinners" kind of way. But praying for you, your well being, your life.

Today's political landscape is full of anger and hate and the disparagement of groups of people. Our immigration debate has in many ways brought out the worst in us as a nation. This past week's storm around President Trump using an expletive to describe certain countries and their populations has intensified the rhetoric.

But the way forward is not more hate, more rhetoric. We can call each other a basket of deplorables all we want. But that will not bring change.

Pray for your enemies. And work for change. We pray for the leaders we violently disagree with. And we go to MLK Day of Service. We pray for those who hate us for our race or our religion or our gender or our sexuality. And we make sure we vote in equal protection legislation for all in our communities.

We don't pray instead of acting. We pray and we act. Keeping in mind of course that prayer is a mighty powerful action in and of itself. It changes US.

Jesus call to pray for our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. For to love them ultimately sets us free. We are freed from hate. We are freed from carrying around so much anger. We are freed from being caught in cycles of digging up and rehashing the past over and over. We are set free. And in that, our enemies cannot hurt us in the same way. If and only if, we are willing to give up seeing them as something other than God's beloved.

Last summer when the white supremacists marched at Charlottesville I was heartsick. I attended the University of Virginia and seeing these torchlit processions going through the campus I knew so well made me angry and feel helpless and hopeless. My reaction was to hate. To dehumanize. To fight bigotry with bigotry. "Southern rednecks. White privileged jerks."

Into that mass of my hate and anger came an interview with Daryl Davis and it sliced that mass of anger and hate clean open. Jesus spoke to me through Daryl.

Daryl Davis is a blues musician. But he has another sideline work. For the past 30 years, Davis, a black man, has spent time befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Davis said one night, "I was playing music — it was my first time playing in this particular bar called the Silver Dollar Lounge and this white gentleman approached me and he says, "I really enjoy you all's music." I thanked him, shook his hand and sat down and had a drink while talking about music. a little ways into the conversation the man said to him,

"You know, this is the first time I ever sat down and had a drink with a black man?"

Davis says, "Well, now I'm getting curious. I'm trying to figure out, now how is it that in my 25 years on the face of this earth that I have sat down, literally, with thousands of white people, had a beverage, a meal, a conversation or anybody else, and this guy is 15 to 20 years older than me and he's never sat down with a black guy before and had a drink. I said, "How is that? Why?" At first, he didn't answer me and he had a friend sitting next to him and he elbowed him and said, "Tell him, tell him, tell him," and he finally said, "I'm a member of the Ku Klux Klan."

"I just burst out laughing because I really did not believe him. I thought he was pulling my leg. As I was laughing, he pulled out his wallet, flipped through his credit cards and pictures and produced his Klan card and handed it to me. Immediately, I stopped laughing. I recognized the logo on there, the Klan symbol and I realized this was for real, this guy wasn't joking. And now I'm wondering, why am I sitting by a Klansman?"

"But he was very friendly, it was the music that brought us together. He wanted me to call him and let him know anytime I was to return to this bar with this band. The fact that a Klansman and black person could sit down at the same table and enjoy the same music, that was a seed planted. So what do you do when you plant a seed? You nourish it. That was the impetus for me to write a book. I decided to go around the country and sit down with Klan leaders and Klan members to find out: How can you hate me when you don't even know me?"

Davis studied up on the Klan and says, "I went in armed, not with a weapon, but with knowledge. I knew as much about the Klan, if not more than many of the Klan people that I interviewed. When they see that you know about their organization, their belief system, they respect you. Whether they like you or not, they respect the fact that you've done your homework. Just like any good salesman, you want a return visit and they recognized that I'd done my homework, which allowed me to come back again."

That began to chip away at their ideology because "when two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy — it doesn't have to be about race, it could be about anything...you will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you're forming a relationship and as you build about that relationship, you're forming a friendship. That's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves."

When Davis asked clansmen why they hated him he said he often heard some version of "if you're not white, you are inferior." Davis said one time "This guy was an exalted cyclops sitting in my car in my passenger seat. He made the statement, which I'd heard before, "Well we all know that all black people have within them a gene that makes them violent." I turned to him and I'm driving and I said, "Wait a minute. I'm as black as anybody you've ever seen. I have never done a carjacking or a driveby, how do you explain that?" He didn't even pause to think about it. He said, "Your gene is latent. It hasn't come out yet."

So how do you argue with somebody who is that far out in left field? I was dumbfounded. And I thought about it for a minute. Then I used his point of reference. I said, "Well, we all know that all white people have a gene within them that makes them a serial killer." He says, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Well, name me three black serial killers." He thought about it — he could not do it. I said, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy. All whites.

I said, "Son, you are a serial killer." He says "Daryl, I've never killed anybody." I said, "Your gene is latent. It hasn't come out yet." He goes, "Well, that's stupid!" I said, "Well, duh. Yes, but you know what, you're right. What I said was stupid, but no more stupid than what you said you me." Then he got very, very quiet and changed the subject. Five months later, based on that conversation he left the Klan. His robe was the first robe I ever got.

Davis says once the friendship blossoms, the Klansmen realize that their hate may be misguided. Since Davis started talking with these members, he says 200 Klansmen have given up their robes. When that happens, Davis collects the robes and keeps them in his home as a reminder of the dent he has made in racism by simply sitting down and having dinner with

people. How One Man Convinced 200 Ku Klux Klansmen to Give Up Their Robes, NPR,  
8/20/17

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