

“People of Grace”
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 2/23/25

Well, as you may be aware, a couple of Sundays ago the Philadelphia Eagles won Super Bowl 59 in an emphatic victory over the Kansas City Chiefs. Usually I don't care too much about post-game interviews, but I was watching the game with multiple generations of native Philadelphians. So when the team took the stage for the presentation of the Lombardi Trophy, we stayed glued to the screen.

A couple minutes into the proceedings, Terry Bradshaw took the mic for brief interviews with Coach Nick Sirianni and MVP Jalen Hurts. First Bradshaw said to Sirianni: “Revenge is served sweet when you get a big old good butt-whoopin’ over the team that beat you two years ago – how good does this feel, knowing that you beat the Chiefs, the team that beat you two years ago?” Sirianni started as it seems he always does, “Yeah, all glory to God first and foremost.” Ugh, here we go again, I thought. I must admit that I’m not a huge fan of the way God’s name is reflexively invoked in sports interviews. I mean, go birds and all that, but I don’t know that God really cares about who wins the Super Bowl.

So I was rolling my eyes as Sirianni continued: “That’s a great football team, first and foremost, and we had to come out and play our best, and we did. And what a lesson to the entire world about what good teamwork does.” Now Coach had my attention. He went on: “We have selfless guys, we have guys that don’t wanna let each other down; we got guys that will fight for each other, that will play hurt for each other. They love each other. Love is a strong thing, and it takes a lot of work to develop that; and these guys, that’s a team.” Oh interesting, I thought. He’s shifting the narrative. Bradshaw’s asking him about revenge, but he’s not taking the bait. He’s putting the focus on his team, how well they work together.

Then Hurts came to the mic, and Terry Bradshaw returned to his revenge storyline. “Ya know, it’s gotta be especially sweet for you, having to answer so many critics who said, why don’t you throw for more yards, why don’t you this, why don’t you that... what do you say in response to that?” Hurts responded by taking the lead from his coach: “God is good – he’s with me in the highs and the lows. I couldn’t be here without my teammates, you know the effort and the determination everyone displayed to get to this point.” Not getting what he wants, Bradshaw switches tactics: “You handled their blitz fantastic today.” But Hurts keeps right on going: “It’s never been about what anyone else does, it’s always been about what we do, and how we respond to certain things, and it feels good.”

As I watched all of this play out, I immediately thought of our Scripture lesson for today: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.” The Eagles seemed to be living out this commandment on national television. Here was the announcer, trying to get them to talk about how sweet it is to get revenge on your enemies, your rivals. It would have been easy for Sirianni and Hurts to agree; I’m sure there would have been a huge roar from the crowd if they had.

But Coach and MVP didn’t go there. Instead they began with God’s goodness, then turned to gratitude for the work of the collective. With humility, both men acknowledged their place within the larger fabric of the team. And they talked about love. Love that takes time and teamwork to develop, love that is willing to take a hit for the greater good. How often do we get such a public example of loving your enemies – not sticking it to them, not hitting them when they’re down, but changing the narrative, away from revenge and toward love and gratitude and teamwork? And I appreciated that these guys didn’t just invoke God’s name, they behaved in a manner responsive to Christ’s commands about how to live out God’s love in the world. Ok, so it’s only a football game, but we’ll take what we can get.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” I remember a children’s sermon from my childhood about this text – it was given by my home church’s longtime Christian Educator, Kathy Kuhn. Mrs. Kuhn asked us to think about someone we didn’t like. Then she explained that Jesus doesn’t tell us we have to *like* everyone. But he does tell us that we have to *love* everyone, even people we don’t like, even our enemies. That’s because love isn’t just about how we feel, it’s about how we act toward others. We can treat someone with love even if we don’t like them.

The word Jesus uses for love here in the Sermon on the Plain is the verb form of the Greek word *agape*. We talked about *agape* a few weeks ago when we looked at 1 Corinthians 13. *Agape* is one of a number of Greek words for love used in the New Testament, and it is the word most often used to describe God’s love for us. *Agape* is love that depends on the character of the one doing the loving, not on the behavior of the one being loved. *Agape* is love that seeks the good, that is willing to sacrifice for the benefit of another. *Agape*, as Paul describes it in Corinthians, is patient and kind and humble and truthful and joyful and forgiving.

And so it makes sense that how Jesus commands us to treat our enemies is to agape them. How our enemies treat us doesn't affect who we are, our character as Christians. How our enemies treat us doesn't leave us room to seek their demise instead of seeking their good. After all, Jesus says, we have received immeasurable mercy from the God who loves all regardless of their behavior. Our response to that mercy from God should be mercy toward others. Christ calls us to live as people who do not reciprocate, who do not retaliate; who respond to defeat or mistreatment not with revenge but with generosity, with care, with blessing. Christ calls us to be people whose lives are characterized by grace.

Now I want to be clear about what Jesus is NOT saying here, when he encourages us to turn the other cheek, let go of our shirt as well as our coat, give to anyone who asks of us, and lend with no expectation of return. Jesus is by no means saying that when we are mistreated we should roll over and take it. Being people who do not retaliate does not mean that we don't take action when wrong has been done. Unfortunately this passage has been used in that way, to, for example, require women who are being abused to stay with their partners, in the name of turning the other cheek and praying for those who hurt you. That is an irresponsible use of these words of Jesus. Our God desires wellbeing for each and every living creature.

And these words are meant not to make us submissive to evil but to empower us to do good. We live in a world where revenge is the norm; where repayment is required for every debt even if it spells the ruin of the borrower; a tit-for-tat world where if you want me to provide something good for you, you have to provide something good for me. But this is not the world God envisions for us.

Christ proclaims a kingdom where all have what they need, where debts are forgiven and the hungry are filled and the poor are lifted up. Christ proclaims a kingdom of grace overflowing, where mercy abounds and agape love is the normative mode of human interaction. Christ proclaims a kingdom where hearts are whole and all creation lives together in peace. Until that kingdom comes in all its fullness, Christ calls us to live its values as imitators of our merciful God: to love our enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Earlier this week, a pastor colleague from my Austin days who is given to posting popular daily reflections on Facebook, shared a piece he called ["I want to ride this hurricane with my heart in its peaceful eye."](#) He wrote it in response to this week's flood of news, and I think it helps to clarify what Jesus is getting at in this part of the Sermon on the Plain.

Jim Rigby writes: "I do not want the kind of peace that has to pretend the storms of life are not happening. I do not want the kind of peace that must ignore the cries of the oppressed in order to sleep at night. I want my life to be a struggle for justice for my entire human family.

"Neither do I want the kind of activism that loses its own heart and mind in the sound and fury of life's battles. I want to ride this storm without losing what makes me human and becoming the mirror image of the inhumanity I abhor.

"I want courageous activism to be like an exhalation and peaceful compassion to be like an inhalation. I want to feel anger at injustice without becoming anger. I want to grieve the world's wounds without becoming grief."

To feel anger at injustice without becoming anger, to grieve the world's wounds without becoming grief – this is why we love our enemies. This is why we do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us. Because we don't want our anger to turn us into walking embodiments of anger. We don't want our hatred for our enemies to turn us into people who have hearts full of hate. God's heart is full of mercy, and God invites us to have hearts full of mercy as well. To stand up to injustice, yes; to fight back against things that are harmful, yes; to be people of courage, yes; but never to let our anger and frustration and anxiety calcify into hatred. Instead, in this world full of hate, we let God's love keep us loving.

The baptisms we celebrated today remind us of God's grace toward us – we are covered by God's grace from the moment we are born. God names us and claims us as beloved. God washes us clean with forgiveness, even before we have had a chance to sin. And God gives us a community of people to surround us with human love that reflects God's love, who can agape us into more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Baptism reminds us that we are people of grace, each of us individually and all of us together.

Life presents us with countless daily opportunities to live out that identity: to love our enemies, do good and lend, to be merciful as our heavenly parent is merciful, whether we're on stage at the Super Bowl or simply going about an ordinary life. Either way, God is there, inviting us to a counter-cultural way marked by compassion, generosity and grace.