



First United Church of Oak Park

What Would Harry Potter Do?

Luke 6:27-38

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If you have read the *Harry Potter* books or seen the movies based on them, you know that Harry Potter got a few bad breaks in his life. When he was just a toddler, his parents were both brutally murdered. After the tragedy he lived with his aunt and uncle, who were cruel to him. His step-brother and friends bullied him. When we first meet him in the books, he is unloved and emotionally abused. As he frequently asserts throughout the series, it wasn't fair that he got the hand he was dealt.

Life isn't fair. Sometimes we wish it were, and sometimes we act as if it were, too. There are plenty of politicians who claim to believe that everybody starts out life with the same set of chances, and we need only to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps if we want to succeed. They act as if life is fair and its benefits equally available to all. But that isn't the case, as many of us know. The "isms" of our world, especially institutional racism, have constructed a rigged system that gives some people a head start and loads others down with extra burdens, some of them too heavy to bear. Others of us have plain bad luck – illness or misfortune that derails our chances. A few have stunningly good luck, whether we deserve it or not. Life isn't fair.

Jesus delivers the sermon we just heard to a group of people who know that to be true. Life isn't fair. Many of Jesus' followers are poor and economically exploited. They live in a region and among a people who are on the margins of political power. There's nobody who steps up for them when they are victimized, as Jesus' examples suggest that they are. In this context, Jesus explores a complicated challenge: How do we live faithfully in a world that is not fair? How do we respond faithfully when someone collects our debt by taking away our only coat? How do we respond faithfully when somebody engages a disagreement by punching or slapping us? What is a faithful response to someone who has wronged us? How should we regard our enemies?

It is easy to answer this question in ways that are too facile. People have taken the "turn the other cheek" passage literally, and, for example, advised battered women or children to return home, forgive, forget, and permit violence to recur unchecked. We have learned the hard way how inappropriate that response is. We misread this text if we interpret it in ways that send battered people into danger. We distort this text if we use it to allow criminal behavior to go unchecked.

I also suspect that we push this text too far if we completely flip it over, as some commentators do, and interpret Jesus' advice as a description of how to shame or call the bluff of people who would take your coat or hit you. Some commentators go there, but their explanations are so convoluted that they fail to convince me.

I doubt this text is so easily reduced to either explanation: to "roll over and play dead" on the one hand or "this is how you can win" on the other. I think Jesus leaves us somewhere between those two alternatives, with a series of demands that are ambiguous, complicated, and almost impossible to achieve: in a world that

is not fair, love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; turn the other cheek; give a loan shark the shirt off your back; forgive.

It's one thing to preach this. It is quite another thing to practice it.

Mary Hess, a religious educator at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, argues that the demand to love our enemies is particularly challenging in the contemporary world. I stumbled across an article she wrote about 10 years ago, in which she ponders the ways in which pop culture and media are prone to dichotomization and the depiction of enemies. Hess identifies various and subtle ways that you and I get sucked into either-or thinking. Maybe we watch Fox News or MSNBC. Or, maybe we enjoy crime shows on TV or binging on a highly entertaining series that pits the good characters against the bad ones; there are many of these series from which to choose. Our media, she argues, often encourage over-simplistic thinking; it's good entertainment; and it makes lots of money.

"How are Christians to respond?" she asks.¹

Dr. King asks the same question in his sermon "Loving Your Enemies."

Both Dr. Hess and Dr. King suggest that a place to begin is by understanding that our enemies are more than one-dimensional, and so are we. To discuss that more fully, Dr. Hess turns to the *Harry Potter* series, which, she argues, resists the over-simplification that she sees elsewhere. She spends a couple of pages unpacking the ways in which evil is depicted in these books. J.K. Rowling does not personify evil in just one person. In fact, she goes to some lengths to show how impossible that is to do; no matter how much Voldemort schemes and plots and weaves spells, he cannot achieve his goal of mastering the world with evil.

But, nonetheless, evil has its power. And, the power that Rowling depicts is the insidious power of evil to take up residence almost anywhere it wants: in people, in books, in groups of people, in governments. Everybody's susceptible to evil in Harry Potter's world. As Mary Hess observes, evil "seeks incarnate form in the broken corners of human hearts."² She asserts that "the *Harry Potter* series actually draws the reader directly into the ambiguity of evil. Is Severus Snape evil? Is Harry Potter good? By the end of book seven the answer to both questions is yes *and* no."³

How do we live faithfully in a world that is not fair and that is, in reality, so complicated?

A big first step is being able to remember how intricate all of us are as human beings. Or, as Dr. King preaches, "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us."⁴

A second step is learning how to put love in action with forgiveness. Any of us who have ever been deeply wronged know what a huge ask that is.

¹Mary Hess, "Resisting the Human Need for Enemies, or What Would Harry Potter Do?" *Word & World* 28:1 (Winter 2008), 47-56.

²Hess, 52.

³Ibid.

⁴Martin Luther King, Jr. "Loving Your Enemies," in *Strength to Love* with a foreword by Coretta Scott King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010 [1963]), 45.

Christian forgiveness was on full display a couple of years ago in the wake of the terrorist murders of the Charleston Nine, the fine folks who were gunned down during their Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. During the shooter's arraignment, survivors of the massacre and relatives of the victims were given a chance to speak. They said things like this:

I forgive you.

May God have mercy on your soul.

My sister taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.

*Hate won't win.*⁵

Echoing a Pennsylvania Amish community that said much the same thing following a mass shooting at a one-room school, these good Christian people came forward and spoke of forgiveness. How do we understand that?

If we understand forgiveness as a willingness to forget all about it and pretend as if nothing bad ever happened, we get it wrong.

If we understand forgiveness as a suggestion that criminals should get off scot-free and avoid the legal consequences of their actions, we get it wrong.

If we understand forgiveness as an encouragement for us to rid ourselves of hostile feelings about someone who has violated us and instead feel good about them, we get it wrong.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Neither is it wiping clean the legal or institutional slate as if nothing had ever occurred. Nor is it developing good feelings about those who have hurt us.

Forgiveness, instead, is a self-conscious decision, which each of us has to make at multiple points in our lives. It's a decision to step out of the self-perpetuating cycle of meanness, or hate, or violence, or toughness.⁶ "The chain reaction of evil must be broken," proclaims Dr. King, "or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation."⁷

That's what forgiveness does. It stops the cycle of hurt and destruction. It refuses to perpetuate actions of revenge or retaliation, and instead it embodies mercy.

It also frees us. I knew somebody once who offered a huge act of forgiveness. When I was working in Hartford, CT, one of my United Methodist clergy colleagues talked about his own experience. Walter had lost a son to murder, when someone had broken into his son's apartment and the unfortunate young man happened to be there; the murderer was apprehended and imprisoned; and, after a few years, Walter sent him a letter of forgiveness. It was transforming for the young man, but that's not what I want to talk about this morning. What I want to talk about is the way in which it was also transforming for Walter.

⁵Quoted in The Washington Post, June 19, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/06/19/i-forgive-you-relatives-of-charleston-church-victims-address-dylann-roof/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.eb3f90c39f6d

⁶Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 2007), 132-136.

⁷King, 47.

When he told us about it, Walter said something I will never forget. He said, "This was the most selfish thing I have ever done in my life." He said he was being eaten alive by hostility and hate, and the only way he could think of to get past those feelings was to offer forgiveness. So he did, and the process was freeing for him. Forgiving the murderer freed Walt from the hate that was tearing him apart.

Many of us will never be able to do something like this, and I understand that. I'm not sure I could. But I suspect that those of us who are able cannot do this sort of thing on our own. Forgiveness and the love from which it springs are less individual triumphs than they are triumphs of community. The power of community to empower acts of forgiveness and love is part of the witness of Charleston, SC and Lancaster, PA.

It's also part of the witness of the *Harry Potter* series, and it rings true. Harry Potter knows how to love not because he is better than anybody else, but because, at an early age, the affection and commitment of his parents imprinted love on his soul. That love is met and magnified by the friends and community with which he is surrounded at Hogwarts. It is the community's love and courage that ultimately prevails. Harry does not defeat Voldemort on his own; it takes the love and action of a community.⁸

"Love your enemies," says Jesus. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . Forgive, and you will be forgiven, give, and it will be given to you."

Impossible as it may sound, difficult as it may be, this is the great good news of the gospel. Amen.

⁸Hess, 53.