

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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On one of our very first dates, Travis and I bought a TV. More accurately, I announced that I intended to buy a television, and Travis told me which one to get. It turns out he was right because eleven years later, that TV is working beautifully. It's tiny, as befits the kind of apartment I was living in eleven years ago. Now, though, that tiny TV lives in our guest room, entertaining guests and insomniacs with soothing Netflix and reruns of the Golden Girls.

The other day, I broke with tradition and moved the TV into the kitchen. After making two different soups for the week and some cookies, we had seemingly used all the available cookware in the whole house, and I knew that the only way I was going to possibly clean the entire kitchen was to have some electronic companionship. So, I hooked up our old, tiny television near the stove. I flipped for a few minutes and then happened on some old episodes of Star Trek — the reboot from the 90s. Perfect. An hour-long show about space would get this kitchen cleaned up nicely.

So, I filled the sink with hot water, soap, and got to work while the voyagers of the starship Enterprise began their usual intrepid exploration in search of new life and new civilizations. The episode went on like it usually does — good guys and bad guys, 90s haircuts and sometimes great, sometimes cheesy aliens popping up all over the place. The episode arc was pretty simple: there was a threat looming in space that only the Enterprise and her crew could neutralize. An enemy ship was about to open fire on some defenseless colonies, and the Enterprise and her crew were sent to intercept before anyone was hurt by the enemy ship. One of the advisors to the captain came to him and said with every bit of force that her rank and personality could muster, "Captain, you only have one option. You must destroy the enemy ship." And, given the time constraints and the real threat of danger, it seemed the advisor was correct. The captain, though, waited a few seconds and then said, "I cannot accept that."

I halted scrubbing my dishes and replayed the scene. The way the captain delivered the line, "I cannot accept that" struck me as bold and courageous. It seemed doubly brave since there was real risk that accompanied his values. Lives hung in the balance when he refused to take the violent approach. And it turned out that the captain was right. The Enterprise came up with another way to deal with the enemy ship, and all the colonists were saved. No shots were fired, and no hands were lost.

Jesus continues one of his most famous sermons in today's Gospel. It's not quite as well known as the Beatitudes from last week, but there are lines in here that are just as beautiful and have left just as an indelible mark on the Christian life. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Jesus is using provocative language to get your mind imagining what it would be like to live your life against the grain of the world. The world says that we return violence with violence, and Jesus opens up our imagination to a different way to live: loving enemies, privileging the poor, rejecting violence.

Or, put another way, I think that Jesus is teaching us to say to the powers of the world, “I cannot accept that.” And he is saying to his followers that when the world tells us that there is only one option — exclusion, violence, oppression, war — our response is to say with Jesus’ boldness, “I cannot accept that.” “We cannot accept that.”

Sometimes Christians in the media get pigeonholed as ignorant, or unsophisticated do-gooders, or even as zealots. But what if instead, we earned a reputation as the people who say, “I cannot accept that.” What if, when the powers that be in the world tell us that there is not money for medicine for children, or that segregation will always exist, or that we must have the deadliest army in the history of the world, we responded with one voice, “I cannot accept that.”

In every generation, there are those in the religious establishment, in the government establishment, in the business establishment who forward the idea that some people who are worthy of the mercy of God and some people who are not. And this simply is not the teaching of Jesus and is not the fullness of the Gospel. There is no known limit to the mercy of God, which is why Jesus lifts up even those who would hate us as examples of people worthy of God’s love. The scandal of Jesus’ words still sting to read. The world is not so different as when Jesus preached to his disciples. He told them not to accept the status quo, and that message is reaching across time to us this morning.

What can’t you accept? What, when you look around our world, and you examine it through the lens of your Christian values, what can you not accept? Because I know it is something or you’re not looking very carefully. What is that thing in your work, in this neighborhood, in this city, or in the world that is going contrary to the will of God which demands mercy for all people? I know there is something.

This week, re-read this Gospel and, for extra credit, read the entire sermon of Jesus preaching on the plains. (If you can’t find it in the Bible, ask a neighbor). Jesus is teaching not just to the disciples but to you, right now. You belong to Jesus every bit as much as those people in the story. Be inspired, and use that inspiration to help you find your voice so that you can let the world know that to be a Christian is to say, even in the face of overwhelming odds, “I cannot accept that.” Amen.