

# **Courageous Loving During Hateful Times**

**Kolya Braun-Greiner**



**February 23, 2025**

**Seventh Sunday After Epiphany**

When I read that “love your enemies” was the gospel message for this week, I thought, “Oh my God, help me with this one.”

Richard Rohr's reflections on the metaphor of the Cosmic Egg caught my imagination this week. Within this "Egg" are the nested domes of my story, our story, and other stories, and the fourth being the big story of cosmic universe story. His metaphor of the spheres of being, nesting within one another inspired me to frame my sermon along similar lines as a way of looking at 3 contexts for the transforming power of courageous love in troubling times: Us – Them – and We.

The first sphere I will reflect upon – Us – includes me. Of recent weeks, I confess that I have succumbed to what Thomas Merton calls the "hate-gods." Here's what Merton has to say in his *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton says that "It is easier to serve the hate-gods because they thrive on the worship of collective fanaticism. To serve the hate-gods, one has only to be blinded by collective passion. To serve the God of Love one must be free, one must face the terrible responsibility of the decision to love in spite of all unworthiness whether in oneself or in one's neighbor."

I confess that in response to the preposterous, though somewhat predicable promises of Project 2025's turn toward fascism and full out rule by billionaires who care nothing about the poor and struggling masses, I have increasingly though disquietedly, and with some admitted visceral satisfaction, resorted to serving the hate-gods. I will spare you the names which I have enjoyed heard or read others have called our opponents now running the show in the White House.

But all of that is really a waste of my precious "life energy" or Qi as my Qigong teacher reminds me. Fear can fuel anger, but if I can instead ask for God's help transform the energy of my fear, it makes more room for love and the positive passion of anger to work for justice.

The current injustices and suffering being meted out on people's lives is unconscionable. Erica Lloyd's very insightful reflection *Inward/Outward* affirmed a tradition in the psalms of a particular kind of lament which is fueled by righteous indignation – imprecation – or practice of expressing a curse or condemnation for God's ears to hear our pleas for justice. I admit that I'm still teetering on the fence about whether this is helpful or just sends me further down a rat hole of hatred.

I find myself caught up too often in worshipping the hate-gods during these times rife with so much imperial cruelty and sociopathic plutocratic edicts, I find these words from Noam Chomsky, an odd comfort since they express the horror and anger I'm almost speechless to express: *I don't know what word in the English language – I can't find one—that applies to people who are willing to sacrifice the literal existence of organized human life so they can put a few more dollars into highly stuffed pockets. The word 'evil' doesn't even begin to approach it.*

The first sphere of "us" would be the personal level, including with our other closest, most intimate interactions, family, friends and community and ourselves, especially our bodies. I'm guessing that I'm not alone in feeling my nervous system dysregulated by the turmoil and chaos going in the world around us. The breakdown of formerly dependable rhythms of life and various forms of oppression going on are registered and felt in our bodies. As Joanna Macy says, Earth is crying through us. Or as Bessel Van der Kolk says, "The body keeps the score," which is why especially during these times we must exercise a spiritual discipline of self-care for our bodies. Our body's response to trauma is not our enemy. My Qigong teacher, Robin Carnes invites us to send an inner smile to all parts of our body.

To be equipped during these times and for the long haul, we have to keep our minds and spirits ready and hearts open, to

be as the apostle Paul invited, “be rooted and grounded in love. (Eph. 3:17)

Beyond ourselves, still in the “Us” sphere, there’s those closest to us family, friends and possibly, community.

Let’s look at today’s story about a slice of drama in Joseph’s reunion with his brothers, which expresses a kind of loving I see applies within the context of family relationships, that we’ve heard Jesus teach. Loving, no matter how badly we’ve been mistreated, as the civil rights activists so aptly demonstrated, which galvanized support for their cause. However, throughout this sermon I want to be clear that I’m never excusing any form of abuse. Jesus wouldn’t either, as he demonstrated to those who were about to stone the woman with a flow of blood.

One might conclude based only upon the life-threatening treatment the Joseph suffered of being thrown into a dry cistern and left to die in the desert, and then plans for him to be sold into slavery that this was something only his enemies would carry out. But the torturous treatment he endured was meted out by his own brothers, immediate family – his next of kin! – who had who had left him in a pit to die. Joseph’s treatment of them however, turns the tables with a transformative and courageous love. Instead of vengeance or retribution he invites his former tormentors: “come closer to me.” He invites them not to be distressed or angry at themselves. Instead he assures them: “God sent me before you to preserve life, to preserve a remnant for you, and remnant on Earth and keep you alive.” I can imagine Jesus would say that too.

Moving on to a second, wider sphere of “Them,” – a spectrum, ranging from those we know minimally or not at all, like the cashier at the grocery store or the person who delivers our mail, to another extreme of “them,” our adversaries, oppressors, those who oppose “us” politically, spiritually,

economically or all of the above...our enemies. I'll also spare you my list of enemies, but I'm well aware that my personal list of perceived opponents is mostly comprised of people, principalities and powers who are enemies of people that I *am* committed to be in solidarity with, but am complicit, privileged and uncomfortably comfortable with not being directly affected. I *am* comforted by our expressions of solidarity with many good causes that we are supporting through the recently approved Domestic Giving commitments and I encourage you to take a look at *that* list. And I find myself asking, "What if my/our solidarity becomes risky and loving enough, I /we would suffer too?" Am I or we willing to do that?

As I wove my way through composing this sermon I returned to my resources and experience as a non-violence trainer and activist.

For example I had learned from Walter Wink's small but mighty book, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, that Jesus' invitation to turn the other cheek is not a passive act of submission. The phrase "turn the other cheek" as commonly used is a platitude, which does not reflect the courage to be nonviolent and even being committed to suffer as a result. Turning the other cheek when viewed in the cultural context is inviting ones opponent to either choose another even more humiliating act of backhand slapping which was used for enslaved people or using the unclean hand! Jesus is flipping the script of power. The same is true for taking the initiative to walk an extra mile to carry a soldier's pack or offering our cloak, it *robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate*. That message for all of these actions would have been clearly understood by both parties in the cultural contest of Jesus' time.

Our references, our interactions and messaging must reflect our primary prayer, as Walter Wink says *the human quality of the opponent must continually be affirmed, and We are summoned*

*to pray for our enemies' transformation.*

In his sermon "Loving Our Enemies," Martin Luther King emphasizes and proclaims that "love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend... We get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with a redemptive power."

But this takes tremendous courage, a willingness to suffer the consequences. King expressed this commitment "To our opponents we say, "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do what you will to us and we will still love you." Wow, that's hard! Am I or we willing to suffer that way?

Martin Luther King adopted Gandhi's *satyagraha* or soul force, a powerful act of redemptive love – love for justice, loving action for equality, love for even the enemy or opponent, as Jesus preached. Most importantly King adds, because this love also transforms us. Otherwise, he says, *like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a [person's] sense of values and objectivity.* Sound familiar?

This past week an email from theologian Ched Meyers shed light on this challenging gospel passage. Meyers being the author of *Sabbath Economics* has written frequently on the topic of Luke's gospel which is often called the economic gospel, since Luke includes so many stories about economic exchanges. He emphasizes that economics in a peasant society is one of hospitality and generosity, or what anthropologists called generalized reciprocity. *This is not a balanced reciprocity, which is a term anthropologists use for trading things with people who are your social equals. You know, tit for tat. You scratch my back – I scratch yours. And [Jesus is] trying to shift the consciousness from that to this cosmology of grace,*

*which is based on generalized reciprocity.*

A cosmology of grace??! That's one in which what sounds impossible becomes possible – a potluck dinner where each one brings one thing and the whole table is full feast! Likewise, in our language, in our words, here's the harder part in our actions – but here's the *hardest* part – in our hearts there must be a transformation.

Here's the hard truth that Ched Meyers brings to us about Jesus teaching to “love our enemies” – Regarding the “woes” that we heard last week – Let's recall them:

“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

<sup>25</sup> “Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.

<sup>26</sup> “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Next, Jesus says: “But, to those who are listening to me...” Meyers invites us to notice that “but” or *However*. Jesus cautions those who are listening, (and now including us) to “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” Ched Meyers interprets how Jesus is telling us those woes are to be heard: Jesus' listeners and we *must not weaponize them; [we] must not solve the problem of disparity by dehumanizing the “haves” or inflicting violence against them. The purpose of this teaching is to push [Jesus'] listeners [and us] beyond the conventional ethos. ...this language is couched in both economic and moral terms.*

What was occurring with Jesus teaching was the proclamation of a new way, a third way, neither fight violently nor flee or

cover in fear, but live in what Wink calls a *counter-community* in a way that models a reign of the God of love.

**And that brings me to the third context** I want to lift up: relationships between people and planet Earth as a place we can aspire to be: We – inclusive the of the whole cosmic web of life, nourished by the love of our Creator and Earth, upon which both “us” and “them” are utterly dependant. Together We are interdependent, like Ubuntu, I am because we are, where generalized and generous reciprocity is practiced and life is flourishing.

Continuing to look for generalized reciprocity or generous hospitality, not tit for tat, a vibrant example of this is found from an indigenous perspective expressed by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her recent book, *In The Serviceberry*, she describes nature as a “gift economy” in which species provide for one another in a circular way in which nothing is wasted. This stands in sharp contrast to the capitalist economy, that vilified and objectifies Earth, where natural resources are valued only as commodities for what they provide for humans and waste is rampant. Kimmerer says *“the language of natural resources suggests that we own them, that we deserve them, whereas I want to remember that it’s a gift. We haven’t earned berries. We have not earned oxygen to breathe. We can’t buy it. It is not a commodity. It’s not a natural resource. To me, it’s a gift from the natural world.*

Here we enter this realm of cosmic egg, we encounter what easily sounds “impossible dream,” impossible dream, but movements of people together have made such dreams possible, through which God’s becomes a reality, coming alive in our in our midst. When our hearts feeling weary and our love weak and inadequate, we can call upon and be filled with the strength of God’s love. Jessica Craven’s Substack blog offers hope and encouragement as we move forward: *We are a force to be reckoned with. We have agency, intelligence, courage, strength, and vast numbers on our side...We have*



*democracy movements the world over rooting for us.*

These reminders give me great hope, a hope that is mirrored in the wider world. As I walked along Sligo Creek last Friday bracing against a blustery NW wind, which was tempered by a stunning sapphire blue sky, I witnessed clustered snowdrops popping up through the dead leaves and the tune of "A Green Blade Riseth" came to me. The lyrics were escaping me, so when I came home I looked them up and the final verse spoke volumes about the capacity of an "impossible love" that brings forth life, from what appears to be dead:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,  
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again,  
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:  
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Now as my heart still feels wintry and cold yearning for the warmth of spring, we'll be soon entering the season of Lent and I will be praying for Jesus' healing of my temptation to vilify and dehumanize those who are doing the same to others, asking Jesus "to create in me a clean heart in me." With a heart full of courage to love my enemies, with hope of change in their hearts, in spite of any apparent evidence otherwise. Instead of being discouraged and overwhelmed by our opponent's attempts make us feel so, let us not lose our enthusiasm for protecting life in all its forms, springing green and growing out of our hearts enlarged by love.

May it be so. Amen.