

THE “US” IN JESUS

A Sermon on Matthew 18:15-20—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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The documentary, *Accidental Courtesy*, tells the story of Daryl Davis, a blues and boogie-woogie keyboard player who lives in Maryland and who has played with some great music artists: Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, B.B. King. Davis is African-American. Which is why it's so surprising when early in the documentary, Davis lets the camera crew into his house to show off an unexpected collection of his: Klu Klux Klan robes.

Davis is not only African-American, he's also a Christian. And I imagine that his faith and today's scripture reading likely have roles in how he ended up with those robes.

We'll get back to the robes later.

But for now I want to talk about a story from Barbara Brown Taylor. In her sermon, “Family Fights,” about today's reading, Taylor includes a story¹ about a man named Joe and you:

You and Joe go to church together and are friendly. Joe asks one Sunday to borrow your lawn mower for a week. After two weeks when he doesn't bring it back, you call Joe who tells you that he loaned the mower to a neighbor who then accidentally backed over it in his truck. Joe “considers this...bad luck...you share, not that you have been wronged.”

So first you go over to talk with Joe. ‘How can I help it if this guy ran over it?’ he asks you when you suggest that he give you half the cost of the mower. You go home, but decide to log in on the online church directory, and pick two people randomly and ask if they'll return to Joe's with you the next day. They say yes.

When the three of you knock on Joe's door, he gets mad. You tell him that you're willing to report the mower's destruction to the insurance

company “if Joe will just tell them what happened,” but Joe threatens to call the police and slam the door in your faces.

So, what to do now? You call every single person from church to gather at Joe's house on Saturday. He probably won't open the door, so you bring placards that read, “Forget about the mower, Joe”; “We are your friends,” and “Please let us talk”. Families and individuals of all ages mill around, anxious about what will happen. Joe “sheepishly” comes out to his front porch, with a check for the mower in his hand. The church cheers, you hug. Happy ending!

Taylor surmises that we don't know if things would turn out this way because so few of us have followed through with this strategy, this dogged pursuit of reconciliation. We tend not to see if God will be with us in this strategy.

We are much better at other strategies or behaviors. Like ignoring an injustice enacted against us. We know how to brush off the microaggression, the improper comment, the off-color joke. Ignoring conflict may work in the moment, but not for the long term when the root of the tension resurfaces.

Or we use the self-blame strategy. We think of how the other person must be dealing with bad stuff, it's not their fault, I must have done something to them. Self-blame may appeal to us if we feel that there is no hope for the person to come around to their injustice, to take the blame upon ourselves.

Or we use the passive-aggressive strategy. We don't say anything to the person but go instead to our boss, our parent, our other friend and complain. We urge someone else to take care of

it for us, to triangulate and to undermine rather than deal with it head on.

Or we vilify and antagonize the other person with no intention of reconciling or listening to them. We start to use labels to describe what is being done but then keep people who seem to fit that stereotype at arm's length, to not dignify their injustice with a direct response but simply call it as we see it. But even if we think we're taking the high road, that road still detours us around or away from this person or people and an opportunity for transformation.

We are formed by the people with whom we interact. We are formed by our responses to each other. The tough reality is that we can come up with a host of coping strategies to dance around attitudes and behaviors that we disagree with or that hurt us. But if we do not sit down, face-to-face, with those who are hurting us, then we do not treat the other—or ourselves—with the dignity that is bestowed upon us by God. Even when we are victims, we have the power to demand dialogue, healing, and restoration in our communities.

This is true for the church and for the wider world.

Mahatma Gandhi told his grandsonⁱⁱ that when we allow even verbal violence to take place in our personal lives, we in a sense condone violence on all scales, including a global scale. The same is true with avoiding direct conflict and dialogue and reconciliation. When we fail to deal directly with conflict in our personal lives, we become ill-equipped to deal with conflict with North Korea, with Russia, and within the political realm of the United States. No wonder we see saber rattling, threats, missives and missiles flying over the so-called Pacific Ocean that seems anything but pacific these days.

But today we read that Jesus reveals to us another world is possible, God's world, God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is like the ministry of Daryl Davis.ⁱⁱⁱ Davis' KKK robe collection? It's the product of his decades-long legacy of befriending and talking with members of the group. Now Daryl could have used any one of the aforementioned coping strategies—ignore the racist group's presence in his native Maryland; blame himself and lower his self-esteem in the face of prejudice; go passive-aggressive and write letters to his representatives telling them to figure out what to do, or seek violent retribution against them. But instead Mr. Davis has tried in his intense way to follow the command of Jesus, to sit down with the ones who wrong him, with people who claim to be faithful to God, and to talk it out, face to face.

Mr. Davis likes to say that when you're in major disagreement: "Establish dialogue. When two people are talking, they're not fighting." On one occasion Davis listened to a Klan member say, 'You know it's a fact that all black people have an innate tendency to violence.' Davis said to him, "I've never done a violent thing in my life! What do you mean an innate tendency to violence?" 'It's just latent,' the man responded, 'All that violence in the cities by African Americans, you've got that, too, it's just latent in you.'

Daryl, took it in, paused, then said: 'You know, it's a fact that all white people have within them a gene that makes them serial killers. Name me three black serial killers.' He could not do it. But John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer—all Caucasian. Davis said 'you have the gene. It's just latent.' He said, 'Well that's stupid.' Daryl said, 'It's just as stupid as what you said to me.' He was very quiet after that and I know it was

sinking in.” Later that year, the man quit the Klan and gave his robe to Daryl.

On another occasion, when a member of the KKK was sentenced to jail for twenty years for a violent offense, Daryl was the one who called the imprisoned man’s wife and drove her and her daughters to visit the man in far-away prison. A year later, the family denounced racism. They and many others have been re-formed by Davis’s dogged, persistent love and imagination that he and these once prominent racists were all part of God’s beloved community, deserving reconciliation.

This is what the Kingdom of God is like. It’s not the absence of strife or conflict—that’s inevitable. The Kingdom of God is people caring enough about each other to keep working toward reconciliation, remembering what has happened but being willing to live beyond the past that has caged us in and isolated us, and to imagine a world together.

The Kingdom of God is you and me being formed in God’s unconditional love for all of us, being formed by the Good News that God loves us so much that God even came to this earth as Jesus Christ to sit down at table with the disciples, and vicariously through them all of us, to look us in the eye, and to say, “I forgive you, will you

forgive me, and let us be forged together by God’s grace.” God has drawn us together, bound us together, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now God calls us to live out that holy unity.

The church at its best strives to reconcile us in Jesus’s name, willing to put aside coping mechanisms—whenever possible—to deal directly with conflict so that the body of Christ may not be split.

Whether we are a Daryl or a Joe or a Josephine, whether we have been at fault or wronged by another, we have a path forward to restore us, to restore the us in Jesus. We have a path of direct confrontation, one-on-one at first, or with a little help from our friends, to doggedly pursue reconciliation, to value our own life and the life of the other, and our life together, as a holy blessing.

We belong to God and to each other. We are the Us in Jesus, the Us of Jesus, the body of Christ. As few as four, three or just two people, sitting together, face-to-face, finding grace and reconciliation, being formed in God’s unstoppable love. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Praise God! Amen.

ⁱ “Family Fights,” Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 83-90, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2004.

ⁱⁱ *Nonviolent Communication*. 2nd edition. Marshall Rosenberg, p. xiv (foreword by written Arun Ghandhi)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Accidental Courtesy*, 2017; parts transcribed on Daryl Davis Wikipedia entry, viewed Sept. 7, 2017.