

February 20, Epiphany 7 (Luke 6:27-38)

It's a terrible fact that we have so many opportunities to love our enemies.

by [Liz Goodman](#) in the [February 9, 2022](#) issue

Life used to be about ordinary, daily interactions that, in many ways, were mildly abrasive. You're pulling out of a parking space, and someone mindlessly walks behind your car—so you stop and wave the person on, though you're pressed for time. You're waiting in line at the library, and someone comes up to ask a “quick question” of the librarian that makes your wait a little longer. All those mild abrasions made us, if not tough, then tolerant. Yielding to one another used to be woven into our days and lives to such a degree that we might barely have noticed doing it: ordinary grace.

But the pandemic and its social isolation have put us out of practice of bumping up against one another in regular ways. We've become so tender as to be almost intolerant, easily triggered by the slightest sleight. Kids in school are fighting, even with other kids they've known for years. Adults in public are unable to keep their composure even over issues with the lowest stakes. The trauma of the pandemic, where it hasn't wrought death, crisis, or ever more pronounced precarity, has been sneaky for its slowness. I've had it about as good as anyone could hope for, so I didn't notice what trauma I'd felt until I found myself weeping almost every day for months on end.

It's fair to say we might find Jesus' imperative challenging, that we bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us.

Both my sons have become actors in their youth. Their school is lucky to have a local theater troupe offer intensive courses on Shakespeare. Shakespeare and Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, has made it clear to them, and to so many other students, that Shakespeare didn't write boring plays, unintelligible, dense as a blinding thicket. He wrote wild plays of murder and mayhem, not to mention sharp-as-a-tack insults, the sort of thing children play at in their imagined worlds given half

the chance. Many of the kids who go for these courses are the last ones you'd expect to see in theater. But what teenager doesn't want to pretend at swordplay?

As my two resident thespians have worked through developing characters and living into dialogue with scene partners, I've watched and listened in on their process. So much of what transpires between two actors as they exchange dialogue is a matter of rising stakes, each giving emotional heft to the other so their scene can increase in urgency and importance. It's a gift when your scene partner can match you, tit for tat.

It's much less a gift in life. So much interaction, especially these days, is a temptation into imitation that makes low stakes suddenly high, that makes people of good character and good will suddenly devolve into behavior you'd discipline a young child for. Really, what credit is it to us if we only behave in gracious ways to those who are gracious to us? What credit is it to us if we slap back those who've slapped us?

We're born imitators. Babies spend most of their waking hours imitating those with whom they interact. The older we get, the more we imitate not just facial expressions or gestures but behaviors, ways of relating. If we're lucky, we're given people worth imitating. If we're unlucky, we're given people whom to imitate is to self-destruct. Thick communities give us more people to imitate than just our household members, which increases the odds we'll come across someone to imitate who will help us find our lives. The church is to be such a thick community for its members, especially its youngest members. Through such community, we might even eventually find ourselves imitating Christ, our highest aim.

This is the path to true life, which I say not as an assertion of dogma but as a witness to my own experience. The clearer a sense I have of Christ going ahead of me in life, setting a pattern and marking a way, the better my life turns out, the fuller and freer my relationships grow, the more abundant my ministry becomes. This is the one whom to imitate is to live, and paradoxically to live freely and fully, grown into ourselves.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain might well put us in mind of grand gestures and heroic charity, of grand narratives in which heroism is imperative. To love one's enemies might have us thinking of enemies of the sort made in war, of divisions that cross generations and engulf entire regions. Such conflicts call to mind how living faithful

to Jesus' words can be nearly impossible, even as it bears the power to save lives and to steer history onto a better course. But going there in our imaginations might also have the effect of releasing us from the imperative to live by these words in more commonplace ways.

I know of a congregation doing important work of racial reckoning, harking back to an event 200 years ago that was an engagement with evil. Meanwhile, it abuses its pastors into early retirement, one after another. Sometimes Jesus is most challenging when he calls us more fully into the room. The terrible fact is we'll have all sorts of opportunities, great and minute, to live by this ethic of loving enemies. And like any exercise, the smallest acts strengthen us for larger ones. Thank God for congregational life, where we can practice so as to become perfect.