Red Ear Sliders and Children of God

A Meditation on Luke 6: 27 – 38

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*Before we begin, let us be very clear that Jesus is not asking anyone to be the victim of an abuser. Turning the other cheek, giving all you have is not a mandate to submit yourself to an abuse. If you are in an abusive situation, please turn to someone you can trust. There is a way out. God does not desire for anyone to suffer at the hand of an abuser, nor does God desire for anyone to live a life of abusing others.*

I guess I will go to my grave feeling remorse over Lori Shaw. I haven’t seen her since 4th or 5th grade, but I will always regret being mean to her. Lori was always bragging about how rich she was. Bragging about her famous gospel singing father. I didn’t know anything about southern gospel groups, so it is very possible that she was telling us the truth when she said her dad was famous. We all just got so tired of hearing about it. And there’s more. Lori was tall for her age. She was on track to be a very tall person, but her height made her awkward. She was growing more quickly than the rest of the class. In my memory she towered over us in an intimidating way, going on and on about how her dad was on TV. This was back in the day when being on TV was actually a big deal. One day, I decided to shut her up.

I, being rather short, sat near the front of the class. Lori was in the same column of desks, but at the back. No one could have seen over her; she *had* to sit at the back. One day, as Lori was walking to the front of the room to turn in her paper, I ever so casually stuck out my foot, and tripped her. She fell hard. There was a moment of silence and then everyone laughed. For a split second I was proud of myself. For a gazillion seconds since, I’ve wished I could take it back. I hope she’s forgotten it. I hope she hasn’t remembered the short, round kid who tripped her one day. I was doing everyone a favor. I was putting Lori Shaw in her place. “Maybe,” I thought to myself, “she will stop yakking about her father.”

I wonder if maybe I was jealous because she had a famous father. She may have been as wealthy as she claimed to be, but I also remember that none of us ever met him. She said he was always on the road, touring with his gospel group. It’s very possible she was both wealthy and also lonely for a father she rarely saw.

*Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.* *Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.*

Lori Shaw was not my enemy. A little annoying, yes, but to say she mistreated her classmates? Nope. Can’t say that. She wasn’t my enemy, yet *I* treated *her* as one. This kind of scenario is so often how the concept of “enemy” plays out for us. These subtle ways that sneak into our lives. People like Lori Shaw aren’t enemies with a capital “E,” but annoyances that seek to undermine our own peace, our own ability to practice love. I tripped Lori because I was tired of her, and because I wanted others to like me. Lori Shaw wasn’t someone to be friends with, but someone to ostracize. She was a threat to the rest of us because our fathers weren’t famous. Our fathers weren’t on TV. Most of us didn’t even understand what our fathers did all day. “He goes to an office…?” My nine year old brain saw Lori Shaw’s dad as a threat. Her important dad made mine seem less so. And, we know what we do when we are threatened…fight or flight, and I wasn’t leaving.

Peter Steinke, in *How Your Church Family Works*, writes:

At the onset of threat, self-preservation has more relevance for survival than self-awareness. Long before we could ever talk or think, we called on automatic processes for survival. We call on them again and again. Besides, they act faster than the thinking processes. When we are anxious, we act before we think. The Automatic Pilot joins forces with the House of Emotion and dominates. In a reptilian regression our behavior is not mediated through the neocortex. Anxious, we are apt to lose objectivity and civility. We are in a position to be neither responsible nor loving. Reason and love are best served in time of calm.

In periods of intense anxiety, what is most needed is what is most unavailable -- the capacity to be imaginative…Threatened, any of us may dispense with our Christian convictions and values. Anxiety is no respecter of belief systems. It is an indiscriminate trigger. Threat is threat. The reptilian brain is not impressed by the sincerity of what we believe to be true; it does what it is designed to do: react instinctively. [[1]](#endnote-1)

But here’s the catch: as much as God may love reptiles, as much fun as God may have had imagining the eventual appearance of reptiles on this earth, from the komodo dragon to the red-eared slider, we are *not* reptiles. We are children of God, designed to be merciful as God is merciful, designed to be forgiving, as God is forgiving, designed to be restorers rather than destroyers, designed to be peacemakers rather than war mongers, designed to tear down walls rather than erecting them. Here these words again: *In periods of intense anxiety, what is most needed is what is most unavailable -- the capacity to be imaginative.*

“Imaginative” is exactly what God has called us to be. In even the most hurtful, most painful situations, God invites us to imagine a way forward. Forgiveness carries within itself the potential of a threefold blessing: for ourselves in being set free from the burden of hatred; for God, as we live into the fullness of all God created us to be; and for the other, the enemy, for the hope of their own healing. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Loving enemies requires imagination, patience, practice, and presence. It does not happen magically, but with great intentionality and prayer. It is far from passive. Two of the examples that Jesus illustrates – turning the other cheek, or offering a shirt in addition to a cloak – are creative, non-violent responses. Both are intended to catch the enemy up in their action, to draw their attention to their abusive behavior. In each example, the abuser loses their power, as the abused claims it. It would be naïve to imagine this a perfect solution, but it is the path to which Jesus calls us, and it is something we can practice in our everyday encounters.

Be careful here: if you spit on your enemy as your turn your other cheek, your heart is not in it. If you tear the shirt as you take it off, or stomp it in the dust before handing it over, your heart is not where it needs to be. This is a reality we must explore. In this moment if we disguise fight or flight with so called love, we are not ready to meet our enemy. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and co-author and daughter, Rev. Mpha Tutu, in *The Book of Forgiveness* offer us the idea of the “prayer before the prayer.”

I want to be willing to forgive
But I dare not ask for the will to forgive
In case you give it to me
And I am not yet ready
I am not yet ready for my heart to soften
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again
Not yet ready to see that there is
humanity in my tormentor's eyes
Or that the one who hurt me
may also have cried
I am not yet ready for the journey
I am not yet interested in the path
I am at the prayer before
the prayer of forgiveness ...

To forgive an enemy is to be a force of disruption. To forgive an enemy is to break the cycle of violence. As long as we cling to and nourish hatred, violence will continue. When we interrupt the cycle, we allow room for God’s creative imagination to flourish. It requires great strength and great courage, but our reptilian responses require strength and courage, too. We can fight like a snake, or flee like a lizard. Maybe there is actually a third reptilian choice? Withdraw into our shells and hope the threat outside will go away…even while we know it won’t. Inaction and silence will not disrupt injustice. Fight, flight, withdrawal…or creative interruption, creative resistance?

I remember looking into my mother’s eyes one night when I was a young adult and telling her that I hated my father. My father had become the enemy. Having interrupted his drunken verbal attack on my mother, I was furious. “I hate him,” I said. “Be careful with that word,” was all she said. I don’t know how she was able to stay present, to refuse to fight, to refuse to run. Without even having words to understand alcoholism as a disease, she knew the truth. While it was a breaking point in terms of needing help, it was also a deeply spiritual moment. “Be careful with that word.” The word enemy in Greek is “hated.” The hated one. “Be careful,” my mother was saying. “Your father is not the enemy; alcoholism is.” Maybe we better be careful when we start tossing the “enemy” label around.

But when we do use that label, and when we have come through the “prayer before the prayer,” we might be ready for dialogue. Tutu identifies four steps of the healing discourse of forgiveness between enemies:

* Admitting the wrong *and* acknowledging the harm
* Telling one's story *and* witnessing the anguish
* Asking for forgiveness *and* granting forgiveness
* Renewing or releasing the relationship

We are not reptiles, but God’s very own children, made in God’s image. We can do more than fight or flight or withdraw into a hard shall of protection. Our bones and skin are fragile, our hearts tender. Intentionally so.

God forgives unconditionally.
So can we
The thief on the cross still dies on his cross
But forgiveness will set his spirit free
And what of you and me standing on the ground
with our piles
of hurts mounting so high
Will we die a thousand deaths before we die?
Yearning for revenge, will we die of that thirst?
Will the rage that fills us be the stake on which we burn?
Will we stumble over every resistance placed in our way?
And stay stuck in the misery of it all?
Or will we take the chance that we might
break free by following
this path where it leads
Past the whys and lies about how it cannot be
Here is our chance
Take this chance
Break free

* Desmond & Mpha Tutu

May this be our path. May this be our truth. May this be our freedom.

Thanks be to our God of tender heart. Amen.

1. Steinke, Peter. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations As Emotional Systems*, Alban Institute, June 1993, p. 18. (Cited at http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke6x27.htm) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Guthrie, Suzanne. <http://www.edgeofenclosure.org/epiphany7c.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)