

*Practical Resurrection*  
*A Different Way of Making Your Point*  
Matthew 5:38-47

So many of us have stopped listening to or reading the news. It feels almost like a survival skill in these days. I've been in conversations where we've congratulated each other on how much less we're paying attention: to the daily drip of expert opinion on the risk of going outside, or to one more outrageous thing the president has said. On a zoom call this week, as we were checking in with each other, one person in my meeting said she's *cocooning* through this time, and we all murmured our approval. It's how we're getting through, some of us; it's what we have to do. We are keeping our heads down and our worlds small. We are doing it for the health of our planet, for each other.

I'm also conscious, often, that it's a luxury, a privilege, to spend this time in my plenty-big home; to walk on streets that are wide enough that I don't worry about whether the person on the other side of the street is wearing a mask. If I keep my head down and mind my own business, and especially if I don't pay attention to the aggravating news, it's easy to imagine that those words of Jesus that we just read—about how to deal with enemies—don't have much to do with me.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who harass you,” Jesus said. Yeah, well—as far as I know, I don't have any real enemies. There's no one I wish were dead, no one (I think) who *wants* to hurt me. I can't think of anyone for whom I don't wish, at least in some vague, distant way, life and health. So when Jesus says that we should love our enemies, it doesn't sound too difficult. I can say I love someone without really liking them—right? And if I avoid interacting with the people I disagree with, or even paying attention to the public figures who make me angry, then I don't have to think about whether I hate them. All good. Maybe.

If your attention to the news has been as spotty as mine has been in the last weeks, you may have missed a story that took a long time—too long—to even break into the news. On February 23, in a suburban community of this country, a 25-year-old black man wearing a white t-shirt and running shorts, carrying nothing, was shot to death while he was out for a jog in full daylight. Two white men saw him running slowly through their neighborhood, got in their truck, and followed him. And then they got out of their truck and shot Ahmaud Arbery. They killed him. The police investigated, confirmed that there was no justifiable cause for the killing, and then everybody—everybody except Ahmaud Arbery—went home. The father and son who shot him weren't arrested until May 7—2-1/2 months later—when Ahmaud's mother wouldn't stop making a ruckus about her son's senseless, so-wrong death.

Everyone in the public eye has said this shooting was wrong, unjustifiable, tragic. Even people who don't usually acknowledge racism in this country have said this. We wouldn't have done anything like that. We don't condone racial hatred, or even discrimination. So what does this story have to do with us, especially in this time when we're just trying to cocoon here?

I read two essays this week in reaction to this story, that I want to share with you. Both of them felt true to me. They gave me a point of view that I couldn't have found on my own. One was an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, by an African-American Episcopal priest who's a professor at Wheaton College. He said,

*[Even a conviction of the men who did this] will not wipe away the dread that events like this cause in the homes of African-Americans. They will not change the tenor of conversations that black parents have with their children....Our problems are deeper, rooted not in the details of a particular case, but in distrust of a system that is charged with protecting us and punishing those who do us harm. Distrust that has come from repeated disappointments. To begin to heal this distrust we need this country to take responsibility for devaluing blackness and permitting violence against black bodies.*

*We need this country to become something different, something more. Black people need to be seen as fully human beings made in the image of God, not a menace to be managed, controlled and extinguished ... We are free things gifted by our creator with the ability to love and laugh and learn and pursue our dreams. Anything less is unacceptable.*

And then he says this:

*[From the beginning of history,] when kings and rulers would not bring about justice, the disinherited put their hope in God. This is the root of black faith in this country: that when faced with the denial of justice we set our hopes on a higher court...*

*For the Christian, that hope comes in the person of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection is the great reversal. It emptied the power of sin and death on the one hand and overcame the oppressive tendencies of the state on the other. That is, for us, the immovable fact of history.*

*There is no bigger rebellion or miracle in the history of the United States than that of black Christians who saw in [the Bible,] the very book used to justify their oppression, the story of a God who disagreed. ...*

*[The question isn't whether black lives have value. That is already decided.] America doesn't get a vote in the matter ... The question is whether this country will continue to find itself in the dangerous place of having policies, customs and laws that oppose the will of God.<sup>i</sup>*

The other piece that sounded like Jesus to me this week was an essay by a young black preacher and writer named Dante Stewart. He wrote this:

*I was on my morning run as the sun was rising in the blue California skies. There was hardly anybody out at that time...*

*I brought my identification like my wife tells me to every time I leave. During the run, I wasn't worried about anything, and I felt good. I couldn't wait to check my pace on my fitness tracker.*

*Then it happened. I looked in the distance, and there was this white man on his porch taking photos of me. Every shot he took, I got more confused. I said, "It's a good morning out here,*

*isn't it?" as if me being respectable was going to shield me in this situation or get him to finally see me as a human.*

*He didn't answer. Here we go again, I thought.*

*My fear quickly turned to rage. I wanted to fight for my dignity in the face of being documented by a stranger and being told I didn't belong here. Policed by a man standing on his front porch.*

...

*But ultimately, I felt powerless. I couldn't even call the cops because they might've mistaken me for the aggressor. This is what black men have to deal with, while others can enjoy their runs. Again and again, year after year. This rage forces me to be angry about our reality and have the faith to believe that better is possible.*

*But on that day last year, my rage turned into deep sadness. On the walk home, I stopped, bowed my head, and cried. These were not tears of weakness. I cried because I felt what many of those who looked like me have felt: the violence of an unloving world. He robbed me that day. He stole something from me in his cruelty.*

*I want my son to survive. I want to know that many of your children will stand up for him when he needs it. I don't want the fear of him not returning home. I don't want to tell him how to protect his humanity. I want him to live. I want him to be free, as God has promised him he will be.<sup>ii</sup>*

When I hold those two voices up next to this part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, I am left with wondering. For some people I never meant to harm, am *I* among the enemies Jesus was talking about? Am *I* one who needs to be prayed for, and loved 'even though'? Prayed for with the hope that *my* people will be moved to repentance, turning, transformation? Maybe.

People of color in this country have been victims not just in history, but this week. They have suffered not just random acts of violence, but unequal rates of unemployment, and a disproportionate number of Covid-19 deaths, and unexplainably low rates of approval for PPP loans. I didn't do those things to anyone, nor did you. But many of us are among those who have benefited from a system that allows this injustice—this cruelty—to happen again and again and again.

I don't know what to do about this. There is no value in beating ourselves, or one another, up with guilt. Guilt serves no one; it changes nothing. But seeing and telling this truth, about a country that I call mine and a system that has treated me well, today drives me to humility, which is always a good thing. It reminds me that I have to keep turning (repenting) from the ways I let this comfort I enjoy come at a cost to someone else, mostly people I never see. It opens me to the possibility that I am one who must be prayed for, because my eyes too must be opened; because my heart too requires softening and change.

And if that is true, then maybe I too have to forgive—turn the other cheek—when I am offended or overlooked or I suffer some unfairness. Not because someone said it's the right thing to do,

but because I too have been forgiven. Because just like everybody else, I still need—I depend on—the power of forgiveness to make the world right.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/opinion/ahmaud-arbery-justice.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/ahmaud-arbery-black-runner-christian-pray-protest.html>