

Give Us Grace to Love our Enemies

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Give us grace, O God, to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men's mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us – the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty – all these and more. But they call with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Ester, that we say: I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish – Amen. Give Us Grace by William Edward Burghardt Dubois (1909-1910)¹

I'm just saying this 1910 prayer by W.E.B. Dubois was way too deep for an 8-year old girl to comprehend. Ms. Ethel, my grandmother presented this "poem" to me as material to practice my handwriting. I was complaining and fidgety while waiting for her to wrap up our weekly visit with Aunt Mary, her sister who had suffered a third stroke and was home bound. She needed to keep me occupied for just one more hour. I had no clue what the "poem" meant, but I recall getting a fudgecicle for writing it 5 times in print and cursive.

Shortly after that, Aunt Mary passed on to be with the Lord and my grandmother cried until she ran out of tears. The two of us talked about how being her sister's caregiver was not a chore at all, but a blessing and honor. She explained to me that as she held Aunt Mary's hand during her last hours that it was the closest to God she had been in a long while. I didn't understand it until I sat with my Aunt Ree in hospice, watching her decline and eventually unresponsive for a couple of days – she opened her eyes and smiled broadly for split second before taking her last breath. It was life changing. Her daughter (my first cousin) and I became closer and renewed our bond as sister/cousins.

I encountered Dubois' prayer for the second time around 1994 in the book, Conversations with God – Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans by James Melvin Washington. A graduation gift from a friend of my grandmother's niece (Cousin Pat) in celebration of completing doctoral studies at Maryland. This time, I not only understood the words and yearned for the message as my time at Maryland was formative to say the least.

When I initially applied for graduate school, my undergraduate professors at Jackson State University refused to write me a letter of recommendation. Oh, I was quite the scholar and highly nurtured at JSU. Their conviction was they had sent students to the University of MD in prior years and they either didn't finish or came back beat down. They were not knowingly going to send me for such a likely experience. I resisted and to

their chagrin went any way – a full DuPont assistantship for my first 2 years (I needed the money!). During my final year in the doctoral program, I was writing a paper and had a major disagreement with my advisor on data design and interpretation. We snarled at each other and I went home disgusted and frustrated. I called my best friend/prayer partner and said we had to pray – to get him out of my way. She obliged, placed his name on a card and put in the freezer on my behalf. Well over that weekend, he died suddenly from pneumonia at 4:20 PM. I was of course saddened about it all, then went to full freaked out when I walked into my office that Monday and saw the wall clock had stopped at 4:20 PM. That’s a whole different sermon. Fast forward, I now had to start research with a new professor with an additional 2 years in the program. Needless to say, I have since changed prayer tactics...getting of God’s way and Let God his work be done on my behalf - forgiving my sins and to watch over my friends and foes alike.

This prayer for God’s Grace has reemerged in my life after another 20+ years and I now embrace it as a frequent part of my spiritual direction and tune up, particularly when times are tough. I offer it today as an invitation to discourse on how we church folks can come to grips with our current social and political realities. I’ll just give you the punch line upfront – **Love Your Enemies.**

In July 1962, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in a Georgia jail and drafted three sermons one of which is **Love Your Enemies**. Dr. King posed to explore first the question, HOW do we love our enemies? He starts with forgiveness and reconciliation – removing the evil act as a barrier to relationship with each other. And even more profound (and often most difficult for me to live) is that the “forgiving act must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged...the absorber of some terrible act of oppression.”² **My fear waned and faith bolstered when parishioners at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston SC and family members of the murder victims openly forgave the mass shooter for his atrocious hate crimes. My knees buckled and I prayed in thanksgiving and confidence, Our God is Able! We’re going to be okay.**

A second part of “the How” is acknowledging that there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. This applies to all of us. Can you see a measure of goodness in President-elect Trump or Hitler? **In a professional leadership training, I recall Hitler hailed as a powerful leader due to his exemplary communication and persuasion skills.** What about the shortcomings of President Obama, perhaps Dr. King himself or Gandhi? **I paused when hearing stories that Gandhi beat his wife and kids. How could this be other than this man of peace was human. I also understand this firsthand. I’m a daddy’s girl, clearly had my grandfather**

wrapped around my little toe as early as I can remember. I adored and despised him. The love for him because he was strong, caring, giving his last penny to help someone in need; he expected a lot from me, sacrificed a lot for me. My disdain for him primarily because he was abusive to my grandmother and one of the most chauvinist men I have ever met. He died in 1979 and interestingly I miss both the love and the pain he brought to my life.

Nonetheless, God doesn't give up on anyone and loves those supposedly good and evil people alike. Bishop Desmond Tutu & his daughter Mpho write in their book, Made for Goodness, that we are all made for goodness by God, for God, like God and it makes all the difference. Their advice is that goodness is a survival strategy, God's plan from the very beginning to keep us of the human kind connected and in mutuality. We have no option but to stick together, we are all inextricably linked and need each other to thrive. Dr. King called that we **love our enemies** and "seek understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men [and women]"²; as God loves so must we, if we are to be children of the Father in heaven.

Have you prayed for your nemesis lately? I offer this love prayer dated 1816 as an exemplar:

A Slave Woman's Prayer (1816)¹

O Lord, bless my master. When he calls upon thee to damn his soul, do not hear him, do not hear him, but hear me—save him—make him know he is wicked, and he will pray to thee. I am afraid, O Lord, I have wished him bad wishes in my heart — keep me from wishing him bad—though he whips me and beats me sore, tell me of my sins and make me pray more to thee—make me more glad for what thou has done for me, a poor [N]egro.

I couldn't agree more that this past presidential campaign has been demoralizing, hurtful, infuriating, confusing and often traumatizing. However, for others it was encouraging, relieving, even affirming. For some, yours truly included, the campaign was intriguing, shocking and often disappointing, but not surprising. Nonetheless, I can rationalize why one would vote for Trump and fear Clinton and vice versa. I think it's evidence that the world is no longer dominated by simple black and white, an elite few voices speaking for all; have and have nots; but blends and blurs and complexities that enrich our common existence and bind us globally. The latter has always been there; the time has come to embrace it as our new reality. There's a new minority (not black, brown, nor red) on the horizon — change and the struggles that come with it are inevitable. Let's be patient and highly engaged as God does his work!

We Christians, church folks from all persuasions and those of moral convictions must commit to Trump's success as the 45th President of the United States. We must continue to pray (in word, thought and action) for him and his administration. We are commanded to do so by God,

already wired to do so through our faith and prayer. We are inevitably connected and if they fail, we all go down.

In a Nov 2016 article, *President Trump: Now What for the Church* (that's us) suggests – "...we should be ready to pray and preach, to promote and [fight unwaveringly for] the common good and to resist injustice."³ [*We must pray that our leaders find the courage to do what is right, particularly for our children whether or not it is politically popular or socially comfortable. This is my starting prayer every day for the last 8 years. We must speak up for others who cannot or may not speak for themselves, and speak out against any "ism" even though it's not your skin. Someday, I don't know how to respond to the bigotry of low expectations, being black, female, once poor, not from Delaware – it can go on and on. I no longer react, I respond with prayer and action. Yes, stand up for the LGBT even when you may identify otherwise, stand up for kids other than your own, stand up for equal pay for women, fathers stand up for your girls, wives and sisters, mothers reach out against misogyny across the globe. If one of us suffers, we all suffer.*] Of course (and I couldn't say it better than Moore's article), "We will pledge allegiance to the flag, but we will pledge a higher allegiance to the cross. We are not, first, Republican, Democrat [or Green], conservatives, [liberals] or progressives. We are not even first of all, the United States of America. We are the church of the resurrected and triumphant Lord Jesus Christ."³ *We are among the most powerful people on earth! Who else other than us, the people of God our Father in Heaven, will find strength to love. Only love can replace hate.*

Dr. King taught us that "the church must be the conscience of the state" and "the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice." Isn't it amazing how Dr. King's teachings resonate nearly 50 years after his death. What a gift his suffering was to the world! I trust this electoral shake up is a call for us to wake up and

"...to dare to do the deed which we well know cries to be done. Let us not hesitate because of ease, or the words of men's mouths, or our own lives. Mighty causes are calling us – the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty – all these and more..." Give us the Grace and Strength, O God, to love our enemies.

¹Washington, James Melvin, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans* (Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1994)

²King, Martin Luther, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press Gift Edition, 2010; Text copyright© 1963 Martin Luther King Jr.)

³RussellMoore.com, *President Trump: Now What for the Church*, November 9, 2016

Tutu, Desmond and Tutu, Mpho, *Made for Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference* (HarperOne, 2010)