



## THE ONE WHO SHOWED MERCY

March 31, 2019, Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 10:25-37

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*O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.*

In 1971 an unlikely friendship began. To put it mildly, this friendship started out rocky at first, but slowly Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis became the most unlikely friends Durham, North Carolina had ever seen. Some of you here may be familiar with their story because the movie *The Best of Enemies* is coming out this week, and you may have seen the commercials already. Or you may know the 2007 book *The Best of Enemies* by Osha Gray Davidson on which the film is based. *The Best of Enemies* tells the story of these two unlikely friends, and the film stars Taraji P. Henson as Ann Atwater and Sam Rockwell as C.P. Ellis.

Ann and C.P. were two of the most well known faces in Durham city politics during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Ann Atwater was an African-American woman and a matriarch of her community, leading several grassroots organizations to advocate for city services. Ann was loud, demanding and assertive, enabling her to be an effective activist and leader in Durham. C.P. Ellis was just as loud of a fighter, but on the complete opposite side from Ann on the same city issues. C.P. was the Exalted Cyclops of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan and a vigilant fighter against any sort of integration between black and white citizens there. These two enemies met time and time again in the '60s and '70s in Durham City Council

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<sup>1</sup> My knowledge of their friendship comes from the book *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* by Osha Gray Davidson, (UNC Press, 2007).



meetings in order to fight for their people. Their encounters were charged with hatred and suspicion. They screamed at each other, cursed at each other, and at times almost brought about bloodshed.

I first heard the story of Ann and C.P. when I was in seminary at Duke, and I actually had the privilege of meeting Ann before she died. With the release of this new film, *The Best of Enemies*, their story is back in the public eye. Just two weeks ago, thanks to a connection with the producer, Temple Emanuel at 65<sup>th</sup> Street hosted a free screening of the movie and a conversation with the cast and writers. With the rise in hate crimes and the tragic violence in New Zealand, Pittsburgh, and Charleston, it was a timely and important conversation.

Ann and C.P.'s story is extensive, but the part that the film centers on is the integration of the Durham public school system. Despite the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregated schools were unconstitutional, segregation continued in Durham, like it did in many southern cities. Therefore, in 1971, the federal government sent a mediator, Bill Riddick, to help bring this divisive issue before Durham and its people. Riddick called his series of meetings a *charrette*, a technique for dialogue and conversation that includes all stakeholders. And in a wise and unexpected move, Bill asked that Ann and C.P. be the co-chairs. I won't repeat the profanity Ann and C.P. both used when they were asked to co-chair together, but somehow in a miraculous way, Bill got them to agree to do it.

This is where the unlikely friendship began. "Over the course of their meetings Ann and C.P. learned some things about each other. Both of their families were poor, and poor kids weren't being served well by public schools, no matter the color of their skin. History and political powers pitted blacks and whites against each other, but when self-interest compelled C.P. and Ann to work together, they came to see how much they had in common."<sup>2</sup> The film shows us how hard this journey was for them and what they had to let go of in order to give their children a better education. They both had to let go of years of hate and resentment. Both Ann and C.P. were accused of "selling out" by their own people. But the miracle

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2 From one of Ann's good friends, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who writes about her in *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, (IV Press, 2018), page 92.



is...they did it, they *found* common ground. This unlikely friendship led to C.P. publicly tearing up his membership card in the KKK and forming a lasting friendship with a woman whom he previously couldn't stand. It led Ann to create a bond with a working-class white man in Durham whom she swore she would hate forever. The two of them continued to team up over shared concerns in their city throughout the 1970s and '80s, ignoring their critics on both sides and showing Durham something radical. Ann and C.P. remained close for a long time, and as a final testament to their friendship, Ann delivered the eulogy at C.P.'s funeral in 2005.

I tell you this story today, likely an unfamiliar one, because I'm afraid that the Gospel lesson that Catherine read is probably pretty familiar to most of us. Because we think we know Jesus' parable of the Samaritan so well, its familiarity keeps us from seeing the scandal of it all. Recently, our women's Bible study had the opportunity to study Amy-Jill Levine's take on this story, and she teaches that the parables have the ability to "remind, provoke, refine, confront, and disturb."<sup>3</sup> Dr. Levine is a New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt Divinity School—and is Jewish—and her goal as a Jewish scholar teaching the Christian New Testament is to help us put Jesus' ministry and his stories in their 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish context. For the parables, specifically, Dr. Levine unpacks the imagery and details so that we don't simplify these stories or romanticize them. She wants us instead to take them seriously as the provocative form of teaching they were and they are.

So let's go to the actual parable...in the story an arrogant lawyer approaches Jesus, trying to test him. As a side note, Luke's not a big fan of lawyers—any present company excluded, of course—so Luke portrays this particular man as pretty rude. Nevertheless, the lawyer knows his Torah and quotes it sufficiently for Jesus. But even though Jesus approves, the lawyer is still not satisfied. "Who is my neighbor then, Jesus?" Jesus is ready for the question and responds with a story.

A man traveling from Jerusalem, most likely Jewish, becomes an innocent victim of a violent crime. He's left on the side of the road, obviously in pain, and near death. As Jesus continues the story, two passersby, ones you would expect might

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<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (WJK, 2014), page 4.



help their Jewish neighbor, walk past on the other side and pretend they don't notice him. Then, because the audience would be expecting a pattern of 3s in their storytelling—two bad examples leading to a third, good example—they wait to see who will help this desperate man. And who comes down the road but a Samaritan, their ancient enemy, someone whom history has taught them that they cannot and should not trust. When Jesus says the Samaritan is the final person in the trio, his audience is left with their mouths wide open—this is the man who's going to help?!? And if the shock of the Samaritan's arrival wasn't enough, Jesus' audience listens to how the Samaritan took pity on the man, bandaged his wounds, took him to an inn and paid his wage, found someone to watch him, and promised to return to make sure he was okay. The Samaritan goes above and beyond to care for someone who despises him. In fact the Samaritan shows compassion to a man who probably would have never wanted his help to begin with.

It's fair to say that Jesus shocks his audience with the conclusion of this parable. No one would have expected this ending, but Jesus uses the Samaritan as a reminder that our neighbor is anyone near us who is in need. It doesn't matter what divisions we have created; when our neighbor is in need, we are called to respond with love. Amy-Jill Levine tells a modern version of this story: in her account an Israeli Jew is beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. A medic from the Israeli Defense Force doesn't stop and neither does a Presbyterian missionary. Instead, with the man in the ditch in desperate need, it's a Palestinian Muslim, a supporter of Hamas, who stops to save him.<sup>4</sup> *That* is how Jesus' original audience would've heard his story.

This parable of the Samaritan takes us back to two passages in the Torah—the *shema* in Deuteronomy 6 and the law in Leviticus 19. These are the passages that the lawyer quoted when he said to Jesus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>5</sup> Loving God means loving all of God's children, every neighbor we encounter. The neighbor doesn't have geographic or

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<sup>4</sup> Levine, pages 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10: 27.



national boundaries. The neighbor isn't defined by political party or skin color. The neighbor is anyone near at hand, especially someone at hand who's in need.

In Leviticus 19, God's command to love our neighbor includes both friend and stranger. Deep down in his heart, Luke's lawyer knows this truth, don't you think? But maybe, like Jesus' wider audience, he's shocked by how seriously Jesus actually takes it when God says "love your neighbor as yourself." Did you notice at the end when Jesus asked the lawyer, "which one of these men was a neighbor?" the lawyer can't even say the word "Samaritan"? Instead he responds with "The one who showed him mercy" as he walks away sulking.

If this parable were set in the context of 1960s Durham, North Carolina, C.P. Ellis would be the man in the ditch who was robbed and beaten. And his friends and fellow church members would be the ones to pass by. But the one who stopped and showed him mercy would be Ann Atwater, an African-American woman who stood against everything C.P. valued and thought was important. But she was the one who showed mercy; she reached out and helped C.P. when he was most in need.

Each time I encounter the story of Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis, I find that Ann was the one who demonstrated mercy, who first showed compassion. Let's be honest, Ann took the greater risk, befriending a man who hated her and could have caused her and her people great harm...indeed, who probably already had. But she did this because she believed Jesus when he said to love your neighbor. Ann wasn't from a family of educated elites; she didn't gain any fame or fortune when she was most active in her community. She came from a family of North Carolina sharecroppers, raised her daughters as a single mother, lived in HUD housing with no need for windows, she used to say, because she could see her neighbors through the holes in the walls. Ann loved her family, her community, her city...and most importantly, she loved Jesus. When Jesus told Ann to love her neighbor, she did just that. In fact, Ann's faith in Jesus was the first thing Taraji P. Henson said about her when she was interviewed at Temple Emanuel two weeks ago.

In an interview before she died Ann said, "My daddy taught me to do unto others as I would have them to do unto me, so I would do to white folks what I wanted them to do to me, and we got along, and we started getting along... [Because] God



is the answer to all of this. Without God, nothing can go on... I always go on record every night as telling God that I tried. ‘God, I could not solve all the problems, but I’m on record with you that I tried.’”<sup>6</sup>

After telling the parable of the Samaritan, Jesus said to the crowd, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” And the lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”<sup>7</sup>

May we all have the courage and the faith to do the same, to go and do likewise. May we all have the courage and the faith to be able to go to our Lord each night and honestly say, “I might not have been able to solve all of the problems today, Lord, but I’m on record with you that I tried.”

*Amen.*

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<sup>6</sup> Ann Atwater: *Transcript of Oral History, School for Conversion*: <https://www.schoolforconversion.org/extended-interview-with-ann-atwater/>

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:36-37