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Title: Let's Talk About...Difficult People

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Text: [Luke 6:27-32](#)

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This week, I was thinking about a porcupine. The porcupine is a member of the rodent family, and the typical North American porcupine has about 30,000 quills attached to its body. Each quill can be driven into an enemy and the body's heat will cause the microscopic barb to expand and become more firmly embedded in the body of another. If the wound happens to be near a vital organ, it can be fatal.

Now, the porcupine is not considered to be a lovable animal. Think about for a moment all of the books that have been published and all the movies that have been made with a lovable animal or animals that are the central characters. But I've never seen a movie that has a lovable porcupine as the central character. I mean, even the skunk has Pepe Le Pew, but the porcupine has nothing. In general, porcupines have two different modes for navigating life: attack and withdrawal.

They don't want to live this way, but they are forced to do so. How does one get close without getting hurt?

We are in the midst of a sermon series called *Let's Talk About...*, looking at some topics in church that we don't often talk about, but we should. We asked you what you wanted to hear, and several people mentioned some version of difficult people. To be clear, when we say, "Let's Talk About Difficult People," we aren't going to "talk about" difficult people. But the truth is, we all have porcupines in our lives. Perhaps, we are someone's porcupine.

I do want to be clear that there is a difference between difficult people and toxic or dangerous people. Some have people in their lives who are dangerous or toxic to their well-being, and sometimes the most faithful thing to do is to close the door entirely on that relationship—for our own mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

But absent that, we all have difficult people in our lives. Whether it is family, work, school, civic organizations, neighborhood, or, yes, even church, we all have difficult people in our lives. We also have people who have different perspectives, different experiences, and while they may not be difficult, we have a hard time seeing the world from their point of view.

You may have noticed that there will be a presidential election this fall, and if this cycle is like the last few, our relations with others will be tested. People who previously were not difficult suddenly become difficult. Difficult people are all around. And some may even see you and I as difficult.

“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” —Henri Nouwen

So we are challenged to be seen and to also see others. I mean, that is what this comes down to doesn't it? We want to be seen and honored for who we are, and we need to see others in the same way.

In the book of Genesis, we are told, “God created humanity in God's image, in the divine image God created them” (Genesis 1:27a).

Each of us has worth.

Each has dignity.

Just as you have been created.

Years later, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus offers his sermon on a plain, the shorter version of what Matthew had earlier recorded as the sermon on the mount. Jesus is teaching about how those who wish to follow him should approach those who could be categorized as difficult:

But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.

²⁸Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either.

³⁰Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them.

³¹Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.

³²If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. (Luke 6:27-32)

I love how this text starts: “Let those who are willing to hear...” It is typically going to be a difficult teaching when Jesus starts that way. Jesus lays down three principles that his followers stick to:

1. Do not reciprocate
2. Do not retaliate
3. Do not draw your behavior patterns from those who would victimize you

Not to react, but to act. File these instructions under “easier said than done.” It feels like such an uphill task to live that way.

Dennis Proffitt is a psychologist at the University of Virginia who studies perception. He wants to know how people create their realities. He has done extensive research on some odd things, one of those things being the steepness of hills. And what he has found is that people typically overestimate just how steep a hill really is. Even in places like San Francisco, where the hills are really steep, people typically think the hills are even steeper than they really are.

Proffitt asked a group of students on UVA’s campus to estimate the grade on various hills around campus. A hill on that campus would typically have about a 5 percent grade, yet most students would estimate the grade on average at 20 percent. One day he was looking at the data and was shocked to discover that on that particular day, a group of students had gotten much better at estimating the grade of a particular hill. He noticed that the group of students who were surveyed on that day were mostly members of the UVA Women’s soccer team. The hills didn’t look so steep to them because they were extremely fit Division 1 athletes who were used to a lot of physical activity. They practiced running up hills.

Proffitt also began to notice that people carrying backpacks saw hills as steeper than those not carrying backpacks. He noticed that those who had just consumed an energy drink saw less steep hills because they believed they had more energy. In short, this was his major discovery: How you see a situation depends on what you are capable of in that situation.

How we see others determines what we are capable of in this situation. Do we see others as created in the image of God? Jesus confronts us with this idea that when encountering those whom we might experience as difficult, do we act or do we react?

Jesus begins by putting up examples of those whom we might find difficult:

- Enemies
- Those who curse us
- Someone takes your coat, give them your shirt also
- Even people who seem to take everything from you, give more.

You can see why it can be easier to react rather than acting as a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ. What does it look like to act rather than react? Jesus offers three examples for us:

1. Give extravagantly.

Give to everyone, and don’t ask for anything back. Perhaps Jesus is being literal, but more than likely, he is challenging us to change our posture toward others. We know that God is generous with love and God gives God’s love generously, and so we should, too. God approaches you and I as a beloved child of God’s and so that is the way we should approach others.

I recently watched the Oscar nominated movies *The Holdovers*, starring Paul Giamatti and Da'Vine Joy Randolph. Giamatti is a cranky and unlikeable history teacher at a remote prep school who is forced to remain on campus with just a troubled student with no place to go and the head cook who must cater to these students of privilege while also grieving the recent loss of her son in Vietnam. Both Giamatti's character and the troubled student are difficult people and poor Mary is stuck with them. What they each discover over the course of the film is that they need to change their posture toward others. They learn to see one another differently, moving from being about self to being about others. They learn they have something to offer one another and it changes everything. Give extravagantly

2. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

When we approach others the way we want to be approached, we give up the need to control them or the situation. You choose words that heal rather than words that hurt. I read an article this week called "How to Complain in a Restaurant Without Sounding Like a Jerk," and the best piece of advice in the article was "not every restaurant bows and scrapes and not every diner is right. Instead of looking at the relationship as restaurant versus customer, take the approach that we are on the same team. Treat other the way you want to be treated."

Finally...

3. Love Unexpectedly.

It is easy to love those who love us back, but it's not quite as easy when someone doesn't love us back.

Loving difficult people is truly an act of faith, and perhaps one of the most difficult things we will do as followers of Jesus Christ because to most, it makes no sense to love difficult people, to share God's love with difficult people, but that is exactly what Jesus asks us to do.

I resonate with and am challenged by Bob Goff's observation that "one of the things that God is asking us to do every day as we meet difficult people is to do what God has asked us to do and that is to love those people. He says, "I'm not trying to be right, but I am trying to be more like Jesus."

Difficult people. The truth is they are all around us, perhaps they are even us in some moments—made in the image of God, formed in the image of Jesus.

It's not really that steep of a hill for us to climb.

Let Us Pray:

God, you have a Word for us today. Your call to us is to live life in a different way, loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, giving of our possessions and not being judgemental. So God, help us to be who you, through Jesus Christ, are shaping us to be. May we be people who:

Give extravagantly

Treat others the way you want them to be treated

And Loving unexpectedly

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen