

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 20, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 6:27-38

At some point in time, you may have run across a theory that, after enough time, a monkey left to type on a typewriter would eventually produce one of Shakespeare's plays (or an equivalent notable text). Comedian Bob Newhart featured an adaptation of the "infinite monkey theorem" in his stand-up routine, where a technician monitored an infinite number of monkeys perched before an infinite number of typewriters, and the technician would occasionally find that one of the monkeys produced something noteworthy.

Newhart would get to the punchline and it would be something like, "Hey, Harry! This one looks a little famous: 'To be or not to be -- that is the gggzornonplatt.'"

This thought experiment suggests that, purely by chance, a relatively inept creature (like a monkey) could produce greatness. Of course, the amount of time necessary to accomplish that would make an actual experiment prohibitive. Humans themselves have functioned under some of these assumptions, however, especially in more recent history, where the assumption is we can do anything we put our mind to. I suppose there are countless examples where, given enough time, one could produce something of at least satisfactory quality.

Now, let's take an example that's fairly familiar -- music. Here,

a person might decide to play piano and sing along, under the assumption that, with enough work, anyone can become a Billy Joel or an Elton John. But, the person has neither played piano nor sung much in the past, so lessons are necessary. Several years pass, and after many lessons and thousands of hours of practice, this person can play piano and sing...but not very well.

Let's be clear, though -- this person became only a mediocre pianist/singer not because of a lack of hard work or dedication, but because of a lack of talent. Think about it this way: Monkeys can swing from tree to tree with far greater ease than a human, but if you're looking for a great work of literature, it's far more likely to come from a human than from a monkey. This simply has to do with what is more "natural" for the person or creature to do. Some may quantify this in terms of gift, talent, aptitude, or whatever, but that's pretty much the way things are.

Sometimes, I've looked at what Jesus asks of his followers, and I find him calling on people to do things that they're really not very good at. Generally speaking, we're better at doing the opposite, especially in light of what we read in this morning's Gospel text. When attacked, for example, we're inclined to retaliate, but Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6:29a).

In saying this, what does Jesus realize that we don't? The simple truth is violence begets violence. Or, put another way, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind." But Jesus puts before

us something that is definitely easier said than done. Yet some Christians take the call to "turn the other cheek" so seriously that, as an example, they refuse to serve in the military. Personally, I admire such individuals for their steadfastness, but I could never go that far! I believe that even the rules of Jesus have exceptions...

But even if we're not very good at something, do we just keep trying anyway? Are we, in this regard, participants in some sort of experiment related to the infinite monkey theorem, where, eventually, we'll do the right thing simply by chance? Jesus really doesn't seem like someone who would keep having us do something we weren't very good at just for the sake of making our lives miserable. But he sure knows how to pile it on; he says, "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again" (Luke 6:30). So, we're supposed to be "okay" with not only charity, but also theft! But then we get to the next verse, where Jesus says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

The Golden Rule.

We have heard this rephrased hundreds of ways, but it basically boils down to "treat others the way you would want to be treated." In that, there's not much room for violence, selfishness, or theft, unless you really enjoy being beaten up, neglected, or robbed (in which case you should seek professional help). This alone makes sense out of everything Jesus says in his preceding

statements. Now, let's turn the tables: If you're the aggressor, do you really want someone to fight back, or if you ignore the needs of others in their distress, do you really want your needs ignored in your distress, or if you're a thief, do you really want your things to be stolen, too? You'd have to have a pretty sick mind to answer "yes" to any of those questions!

I'm a firm believer that Jesus gives us the gift, talent, and aptitude to be better people than violent, selfish, and thieving miscreants who are beyond redemption. In fact, it is because we are redeemed that we are able to do otherwise. Jesus himself bore the worst of our violent, selfish, and thieving natures and died on a cross to put all that bad stuff to death in us. So maybe when Jesus calls us to do something that we think we're not very good at, we're better -- in Jesus -- than we'd ever imagine. We don't get that kind of gift in other parts of our lives; going back to the example of music, we can only be a mediocre musician at best if we have no musical talent. Jesus probably won't help us with that. But Jesus, by virtue of his life offered up for us, can make us better Christians -- by removing the sin that would otherwise hold us captive to violence, selfishness, thievery, and all manner of evil.

The results may not be immediate, but Jesus will keep working on us, especially through proclamation like that we hear today. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36), he says. Jesus goes so far as to put the example right in front of us; surely, as he has forgiven our sins, we can forgive others, and,

beyond that, if any judgment is necessary, he will see to it. And -- I will emphasize -- that is his job, not ours. Simply read to the next verse, and you will find Jesus saying, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive; and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). Let us remember, too, that we can be judgmental and unforgiving both to others and to ourselves. Think of how that can limit what God can do in and through us, because we're probably better at some of this stuff than we think!

We're better because we're not monkeys perched in front of typewriters who might eventually produce greatness merely by chance; instead, we are intelligent, capable people called by our Lord out of sin and death into redemption and life, which makes the good that we do not a matter of chance, but a matter of being. It is who we are. We are agents of God's mercy through the ministries of assistance, healing, and reconciliation to which Jesus calls us. These things happen at St. Anne's because God's mercy has gotten a hold on you and motivated you to share it with others.

And if those things Jesus asks of us are out of our comfort zones, it's probably because we let them be. We forget that he has given us the grace to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and turn the other cheek (Luke 6:27-29a). Our limitations are, thus, largely self-imposed or a little of that sinful self working its way back into us.

When I was about nine years old, I was trying my hand at bowling

through a program for grade schoolers offered by the Crookston, Minnesota park board. One afternoon at the bowling alley, after several gutter balls, I was sniffing and almost in tears -- cursing my bowling ball about the best a nine-year-old could. "Dang ball, dang ball," I repeated in frustration. A big, burly guy using the lane next to me said, "That ain't no 'dang ball,' now, give it another try!" I threw my ball, and I got a strike. The big, burly guy said, "See!"

My Dad used to say, "It isn't the equipment, it's the operator." And if Dad had been at the bowling alley that day, he would've said exactly that to me. As Christians, our bodies are the equipment and our minds are the operator in this case, and there's a lot of good we can do provided our minds don't impose limitations on us. So, we could see what Jesus calls us to do as a very tall order...and shy away. But then, when that happens, we could also see what Jesus has done for us, and everything might look a little easier. After several gutter balls without him, with him we could hit a strike.

As for the monkeys, they'll be the last creatures on earth using typewriters at the rate they're going...even after I'm long gone.

And in the meantime, we'll have done a lot of good, thanks to Jesus' call and his redeeming grace.

Amen.