

Youth Sunday Sermons
By Griffin Momsen-Hudson & Maddie Brigman
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Griffin Momsen-Hudson
Matthew 5:43-48

I recently read the book, *Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist* by Eli Saslow. This book tells the true story of Derek Black, a former white nationalist leader. Derek Black is the son of Don Black, a notorious former Klu Klux Klan Grand Wizard, and godson of David Duke, another former grand wizard of the KKK. Derek Black was once the future leader of white nationalism who ran a daily radio show with his father, promoting white nationalist ideas and oppressing minorities. He also was a moderator and frequent poster on the white nationalist website, Stormfront. One of his most famous talking points was the idea of white genocide, the conspiracy theory focused around the idea that the white race is dying off due to non-white immigration and so called “forced assimilation.” The crux of this conspiracy is the supposed Jewish control of the United States and desire to destroy the white race. We know these ideas to be untrue and abhorrent, yet these racist and harmful ideas continue to be present in the United States today. Derek Black’s pleasant character and undeniable intellect are what made his message so influential. He was kind to everyone he met, regardless of their race, and despite his bigotry, refused to use racial slurs. In order to justify his hateful ideas, he used pseudoscience and IQ data to justify his claims, as well as violence and incarceration statistics. By using data, he claimed that he was not prejudiced, simply just noting the natural order of things. Clearly this was untrue.

Derek Black was a student at New College in Florida, hiding his white nationalist identity from others and everyone only knew him for his kind and intelligent manner. He would often play country songs in the quad and have a Jewish friend of his, Matthew, come sing along with him. Once his white nationalist background was revealed, he was immediately ostracized by the student body and there were talks of expelling him from the campus. However, due to his great academic record and good behavior, he was allowed to stay there by the school.

After his political views were revealed, Matthew and a few of Derek’s friends invited him to their weekly Shabbat dinner on Friday. By taking the so-called enemy into his home, Matthew substituted love and connection where there was originally animosity. It was risky, but the simple act of reaching out with kindness began to change Derek’s racial perspective. Prompted by data given by one of Derek’s friends that revealed the legitimate reasons behind the racial disparities in our country, Derek began to think to himself: Why would he hate a group that is significantly disadvantaged or why would he promote an ideology that would hurt one of his closest friends? When you begin to love your so-called enemy, why would you want to do anything that would hurt them? The students who ostracized Derek and harassed him in the cafeteria and on-campus had already received their reward, the feeling of moral superiority. Let me be clear. We are all called to stand against white nationalism in all its forms. But, when we are already in the right, especially in a clear-cut situation like this, we don’t feel like we need to make an effort to change people’s minds, just like the students who harassed him. They should have protested his beliefs and not him for believing what he did.

Derek's friends went out of their way to make an actual connection with the one who could have easily been deemed an enemy. It was a holy act. This act of love and compassion began to change Derek's mind and he began to question his belief system. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Being a follower of Jesus is not easy, but in order to be one, there are certain things we must do. Jesus does not care about our comfort or about social conventions or what society thinks the right thing to do is. Giving up hope on someone and deeming them the enemy is the easy way out. As Pulitzer Prize winning rapper, Kendrick Lamar, said, "In today's day and age, we practice the self-pity of taking the easy way out." Jesus cares about treating others with kindness and love and understanding, even if it is the most difficult thing to do. After all, it is easy to love those whom we already have a natural connection with. Just as the Gentiles love the Gentiles and white nationalists love other white nationalists, Christians should love other Christians and everyone else as well, as should all people. If we love those who love us, what reward do we have? Instead, Jesus is saying that we need to go out and love those who do not love us and show kindness, like Derek's friends did. And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? By staying in our comfort zone and following social conventions, we've already received our reward. The true reward is being a child of God in Heaven.

Today's passage from the gospel of Matthew takes place during the Sermon on the Mount. During his sermon, Jesus tells his followers how to live as Christians and one of the most important aspects of being a Christian is loving other people. Jesus does not make it easy. His teaching is not only to love those who already love us, but also to love those who persecute us, our supposed enemies. Truly, we have no enemies. We are all one human race who live on the same earth. By loving only our neighbor, we are creating unnecessary divisions.

Let's focus for a moment on a very difficult verse in this passage, verse 48. Be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect. At first glance, this is definitely a challenge. No one is perfect and we are all ultimately flawed, unlike God. But if we look into the Greek, the word for "perfect" used here is *Teleios*, which means to fulfill the purpose for which you were designed. So, by loving others, going out of our comfort zone, and doing difficult things, we are fulfilling our purpose, which is God's purpose for us, to be loving children of God. However, this does not mean we are not Christian simply for our reward in heaven. We are Christians because we know God is worthy of worship and ultimately God provides the best way of living. There are so many reasons to be Christian, but going to heaven should not be a primary one, which is something I continue to struggle with. As philosopher Immanuel Kant said, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." Our purpose, as children of God, our *Teleios*, is to love others.

Helping other people in itself is its own purpose. Showing love alone is its own purpose. Reaching out to other people is difficult and I often feel at school that we are subconsciously told that we shouldn't for fear or for whatever reason. I've learned that the world can be like that too. People are identified based on the way they act and based on the other people they hang around. I've learned when I really make an effort to know someone, they're just another normal, complicated person who wants connection, who wants friends, who needs love, and who needs support, even white nationalists. Exclusion only leads to further division and more

hate between groups. Welcome and love are the ways to solve these problems. Once we reach out, no one is the Other. It's just us. Amen.

Maddie Brigman
Psalm 23

I'm sure a lot of you know that I love to sing. It lifts my mood and has gotten me through many a mental breakdown, because whenever I start singing "On my Own" from Les Misérables, I realize that compared to the character Eponine, who sings that song, my life rocks. Maybe I got a 42 on a chemistry test (that is not a fake grade, I actually did), but I'm not hopelessly in love with someone who is hopelessly in love with someone else. I'm not starving on the streets. I wasn't neglected as a child, all unlike Eponine. Not to say that my problems aren't valid, but having some perspective is always good. Singing helps me to feel content. It leads me beside still waters, it restores my soul.

But, to be content is subjective, and different people find it in different things. My mom finds contentedness in warm, sunny days. My brother finds it in Baby Yoda. Mostly, people are content when they stop doing what they're told to do, and start doing something they truly love. I find this comfort in singing, and so I decided that I wanted to pursue a career in musical theatre.

These things that we love refresh our souls, they renew us, and guide us through dark times. But, more than things, people can refresh and renew us. Ever since I can remember, my sister, Lily, has been renewing people. Growing up, anytime someone fell and cut their knee, she would show up, without fail, holding an ice pack, a band-aid, and a cup of water. I remember one time when my older brother fell, probably on his bike or something, Lily came around the corner in the kitchen, not even old enough to read, bearing gifts to care for her brother. No one ever told her to, but she just wanted to make the people she loved feel better, and that was her way of doing so.

In the same way, God shows up in our lives to guide us through times of trouble and unease. But, God's identity is disguised. For my mom, he's the sun. Me, music. My sister, the smile on people's faces as she hands them that band-aid.

But so often, we ignore this guidance in favor of what we think is comfort. Like I mentioned, my comfort is musical theatre, so I'm pursuing it in college. But sometimes, a blessing can seem like a curse, and in these past months, the art that I loved so much had become a burden. The college process has been pretty brutal for me, from essay-writing for 20 schools to prescreens to traveling all over the country to audition. And, before anyone mentions it, yes, I applied to 20 schools, because you basically have to apply to 15-20 in theatre because of its competitiveness. So, I am crazy, but not too crazy. During this process, my mom has been the only reason I ever got anything done and turned in, and is probably the only reason I'm still able to think straight. She made folders for me, gathered up a list of requirements for my schools, filmed my prescreens, re-read my essays and read over every single application before it was turned in. Yet, I have been anything but appreciative. I yelled at her, ignored her, cried and fought at her. And honestly, I don't really know why. Well, it's because I'm stressed.

But, why would I lash out at my mom? She's the only person that's been able to guide me to some sort of calm during the college process. So, I didn't really know why I've targeted her, until one night, when I had a breakdown the night before I was supposed to travel to New York for three college auditions. I was crying because I couldn't cut my resumes straight, but really, I was crying because I was overwhelmed and scared and lost. My mom sat me down, and I put my head in her lap, and she asked if we could be on the same team. She told me how she felt about me pushing her away, and said that she had confided in a friend, who'd been through this college process before, with her own daughter. That friend said that I was probably lashing out at my mom because I needed some release, and at the end of the day, I knew my mom would always love me unconditionally. I hadn't realized that, but it was true. My mom and I hugged and she told me she would cut my resumes. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff— they comfort me.

We can choose to ignore the shepherds that God has put in our lives. Because sometimes, it feels like we know exactly where we're going and how to get there. And, sometimes when God leads a shepherd into our lives, it feels like an interruption. Sometimes, we lash out at God because we know his love is unconditional. But, maybe God was cutting us off before we were going to take a wrong turn. Maybe God was just leading us on the faster route to our destination, or at least the one without any tolls. If we ignore the little ways that God guides us through life, we're in turn ignoring the path to true happiness. I was ignoring the way my mom was leading me because I felt as though I had to go through the process alone. But, I was never alone. She was always guiding me, but I was shutting myself out from her. As soon as I let her interrupt, she led me down the right path, and I knew that I could go through with those auditions. As soon as we follow our shepherds, surely goodness and mercy will follow us, all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long.

So, let God interrupt. Find God in the people you love, and don't push someone away that's just trying to be your shepherd through the darkness. Don't be afraid to be that guide for someone else, give them that hug, or that band-aid, and lead others toward still waters. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And as long as we let God be our shepherd, God can lead us all through our own dark valleys and to God's table, where our cups can overflow with goodness and mercy, and we can dwell in utter contentedness forever. Amen.