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## Love is the Way

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The grizzled bounty hunter sat in disarray before his leader. His compromised armor evidence of violence he almost didn't survive. But he did. And brought in a bounty that paid so extravagantly the money he presented to his leader was more than enough to upgrade his armor and his status. Humbly, he requested the large amount of money left over be given toward the care of the orphans his kind referred to as "foundlings" – children who were victims of injustice, war and loss. In response to his request the leader nodded and said his act of courage and generosity meant he deserved to wear a signet, a symbol, on his armor designating his status. But he refused, stating he did not deserve it because, "It was not an honorable act." Because he had been helped by an enemy. When asked why an enemy would help him, the bounty hunter said, "It did not know it was an enemy."

This scene in the middle of the first season of the television series *The Mandalorian*, a story from the *Star Wars* galaxy, not only speaks to the heart of the series, it is also the heart of today's Gospel. "Love your enemies," Jesus said, "and do good to those who hate you."

Those who are familiar with the Gospel might be so comfortable with Jesus' words it can be challenging to imagine what they mean in our modern lives. After all, what Jesus talks about is completely opposite of we are more used to hearing: things like survival of the fittest, or wealthiest. That's where stories, movies, or television series like *The Mandalorian* can help us realize Jesus' words are not only written by someone thousands of years ago, they can help engage our holy imaginations to help us manifest the love of God on earth today.

For those of you unfamiliar with the series, it is about one man attempting to live the strict creed – a belief system - of his people called Mandalorians. At its core, their creed is about care for each other and the other, especially children who are orphaned or abandoned. We learn early in the series the main character, a Mandalorian named Din Djarin, was orphaned during a war and rescued by the Mandalorians who cared for him and raised him.

This bit of information is important because the bounty that paid so extravagantly was for a child, an orphan. This child looks strange: it's green with abnormally large, pointed ears and is unable to speak. Because of this, it is easy for many characters in the series to dismiss it and overlook that someone wants to pay a lot of money for the child to be brought in dead or alive, preferably dead. But not, it turns out, the Mandalorian Din Djarin. He felt guilty for collecting the

bounty on the child. Because that child helped him survive an attack from a wild animal using what any fan of *Star Wars* recognizes as The Force. The child might look odd, might not be able to speak, and no one knows where it is from, but it used a mystical spirituality to help someone who was his enemy. This act of love nagged at The Mandalorian. It reminded him the Creed he believed and cherished is specific about the care and protection of orphans. This set up a conflict in him. One that was resolved by his love for his people and creed that made him see the child not as an enemy or bounty, but a child in need of care, like he was. In the series, whenever a Mandalorian acts on that creed, they say, "This is the Way."

Following the Way of the Mandalorian, Din Djarin rescued The Child, whose name we find out later is Grogu, which started a new adventure where he and Grogu traveled the galaxy. Wherever they went, Grogu had a powerful effect on people, especially those afraid of him because of the powerful people trying to kill him or those disturbed by his appearance. Whenever Grogu used the Force to help or heal those who were afraid, they changed and tried to help protect and care for him because they grew to love him.

When Din Djarin was finally able to present Grogu to the leader of the Mandalorians, she quested him with caring for Grogu as his father until he could be reunited with its own kind, the Jedi who she referred to as sorcerers and enemies of Mandalorians. When Din asked how he was supposed to find these mysterious enemies, her response was simply, "This is the Way."

Whenever any Mandalorian was presented with a task that seemed impossible or difficult, but in line with their code, the response was always reciting, "this is the Way." If you watch the entire two seasons of *The Mandalorian* you can see following the creed may have been difficult, but it was not impossible, and it created some good in that galaxy far, far, away. That's why this series has been well received by so many different people. Especially clergy, not just those of us who grew up with *Star Wars* and are fond of it.

Today's Gospel has Jesus speaking of something just as difficult to live into: manifesting the love of God on earth. The words of Jesus are so counter-cultural it might be temptingly easy to dismiss them as something from a long time ago in a place far away. That's probably why some commentaries that go into great detail describing cultural practices of Jesus' time as evidence that these words don't apply to us today.

But there are other scholars and commentators who argue the words of Jesus are to inspire our moral imaginations. This means we need to reflect on what Jesus' words mean for us in order to think about how we can respond. For

example, just because no one has slapped my face doesn't mean I can't think about how I could respond to violence both verbal and physical with non-violence as a creative response to sin.

A few years ago, The Episcopal Church did some work around this and came up with a program and language to help us put Jesus' words into action as individuals and an institution. It is called, not dissimilar from The Mandalorian's Creed, The Way of Love. Instead of saying, "This is the Way" we say, "Love is the Way." Not the selfish, self-centered kind of love that wants what it wants and will go to any length to get it, even if that means causing harm. The Way of Love is the self-sacrificing Love of God embodied in Jesus Christ. This Love is what guides our decisions and informs our actions. When we see people that some might call enemies through The Way of Love, we refrain from dehumanizing them, so that we can recognize their pain, fear, or vulnerability and empathize with them. When we see people through the Love of God in Jesus, then we don't see enemies, we see fellow beloved children of God. This is the Way of Love. This is not a sentimental way of excusing harmful behavior. It is a powerful way to heal and help. As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, it can change the world, like it does in *The Mandalorian*.

But can it happen in our real world where there is so much injustice, violence, anger, and division? In his book *Love is the Way Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*, Bishop Curry describes many times this has happened. Once was in 2016, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, at a campaign rally for then candidate Donald Trump. As was common in all the rallies at the time, there was a disruption caused by protestors. When law enforcement officials led the protesters out, a man named John McGraw, a 79-year-old white supporter of Donald Trump, jumped out of the crowd and punched one of the protestors, a Black man named Rakeem Jones in the face. When interviewed after the event Mr. McGraw said, "He deserved it. The next time we see him we might have to kill him. We don't know who he is." Mr. McGraw was arrested and charged with assault. When he appeared in court, he pleaded no contest, apologized, and was sentenced to twelve months of probation. But that is not where Love prevailed. After the court hearing, Mr. McGraw approached Mr. Jones, the two men shook hands and Mr. McGraw said, "If I met you in the street and the same thing occurred, I would have said, 'Go on home. One of us will get hurt. That's what I would have said, but we are caught up in a political mess today. And you and me, we got to heal our country.'" In response, Mr. Jones suggested they go out to lunch. Which they did.

This is the Way. The Way of Love.

The Way of Love repented of the sin of hate and making enemies out of our neighbors, even if they are neighbors who look different or believe differently or have different political affiliations. The Way of Love reconciled and began the long, slow difficult but not impossible work of healing that which is broken.

It is important to mention today's Gospel has been used to justify actions and practices that are not The Way of Love. Things like slavery, sexism, abuse, putting institutions and economies before the wellbeing of all, especially the vulnerable. Such things were wrong and still are. They have caused harm in families, communities, economies, and institutions like schools and churches. But one of the miracles of Jesus' Way of Love is whatever has been broken can be healed. Not with money or power, but with the Love of God and each other. With forgiveness and self-sacrifice, stuff that is very difficult, but not impossible when we remember what is at the heart of today's Gospel, "Love your enemy". When someone doesn't know they are an enemy, the Way of Love makes room for miracles like healing, hope, and forgiveness, not only in a galaxy far, far way, but right here and right now. This is the Way for us. The Way of Love.