

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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XV Pentecost, Matthew 18:21-35

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning, Trinity Church! And, oh, people of God: may we hear the Gospel this morning, and may we abide it always: **God calls us to devote ourselves to affection, rather than indignation** ... *God calls us to devote ourselves to affection, rather than indignation.*

For many years now, my family has spent special summer evenings watching Hollywood franchises in sequence, often in the same sitting: beginning when the kids were little with the foundational *Star Wars* films and continuing through solidly-PG standards *Back to the Future* and the Christopher-Reeve *Superman* movies. We incrementally graduated in maturity, eventually advancing through the *Star Trek* films and their recent reboots, the Christopher Nolan-directed *Batman* series and the *James Bond* catalogue, until, this July, we made our way through all 24 – *twenty-four!* – movies comprising the current “Marvel Universe.”

For these American-cinema primers we pop popcorn, settle into our preferred seats on the sofa and in the comfy chairs, and fuss good-naturedly about when to pause the action for an ice-cream break. These experiences have built for us a common vocabulary of characters and places, bits of dialogue and short arcs of storyline that we can share around the supper table and on our morning drives to school as live-action gifs exchanged without context: “1.21 gigawatts!” when expressing incredulityⁱ ... or “I’ve got a bad feeling about this!” when urging cautionⁱⁱ ... or “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few ... or the one,” when conceding a package’s last Oreo.ⁱⁱⁱ

This pandemic summer we added Netflix shows to our pop-culture classroom. Last month we enjoyed all of *Stranger Things*, and, just last week, we finished the first season of *Cobra Kai*.^{iv} *Cobra Kai*: originally aired on a premium iteration of YouTube, the series continues the story of *The Karate Kid* movies, cleverly fast-forwarding 35 years the lives of triumphant underdog, Daniel LaRusso, and his sandy-haired nemesis, Johnny Lawrence. Whereas *Stranger Things* offers an unquestioning, neon-colored and synthesizer-laden love song to the 1980s, *Cobra Kai* interrogates that high-gloss nostalgia, retelling *The Karate Kid* from the perspective of Johnny, who, these decades later, suffers estrangement from his only son, drives the same Pontiac he drove in high school, and drinks as many Coors Banquet Beers as the corner store will sell him.

When late in the season these former rivals finally sit down together at a bar, Ralph Macchio’s character begins, “So your stepdad was a [jerk,] huh? Back in the day, I just figured you were living the life – fancy cars, motorbikes,” making reference to scenes from the first films.^{vi}

Lawrence responds, “[Encino Hills] had its moments. Then I’d come home and ... get bullied every day [by the man who was supposed to love me]. That’s why I joined Cobra Kai [the karate dojo that lived by the mantra, “Strike First. Strike Hard. No Mercy.” My instructor] gave me more attention than I ever got at home. That guy was more than my sensei. He was like a father to me ... Eh, you wouldn’t understand.”

With an surprised glance that we viewers anticipate, LaRusso replies, “My dad died when I was eight. *Mr. Miyagi* was like a father to me.” And with a wink to us watching from home, he orders another round and shakes his head: “It’s crazy, man, both of us finding karate role models,” leaning into the ridiculousness of it all.

This morning’s Gospel appointment follows the parable of the lost sheep and last week’s instruction regarding conflict in the Christian community. Both of those lessons employ hyperbole to make their point: that **God calls us to demonstrate relentless love and pursuit of one another**. Now, though Jesus uses exaggeration for rhetorical effect to make this point, the moral standard he articulates nonetheless stands as righteous ... and, when *we’re* that one straying sheep or that one stubborn brother, we certainly hope for God to show us such Grace.

Today’s lesson continues this series of teachings and their rhetorical strategy, and it, too, begins with hyperbole. Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”^{vii} And, with a wink to us viewers watching from home, Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, *seventy-seven times*” ... *seventy-seven times*.^{viii}

Now, seventy-seven forgiveness-es sets an impossible standard – and could even be imperiling: physically, emotionally, spiritually, and otherwise. So, for us who sincerely want to follow this model of Jesus, how *do* we behave? That is, *practically*, how do we honor Jesus’ call without the benefit of God’s deep well of Grace, that Grace that is God’s alone?

I have appreciated how *Cobra Kai* muddies our easiest affinities, offering a counterpoint to years of Hollywood blockbusters. See, packaging a morality tale in two characters so firmly fixed in our cultural landscape sneakily surfaces *real* questions: perhaps first, can we celebrate Daniel LaRusso as a success story? Now a car-dealership magnate, he has turned his affability and go-getter grit into the American Dream, a “better” life for himself and his chosen family. Is our questioning his achievements and his happiness anything more than sour grapes, reflecting disappointments in our own situation, how these last 35 years have turned out for us?

On the flipside, despite these superficial trappings of success, LaRusso still operates with an underdog’s air, as though righteousness has residual value, and his difficult adolescence has granted him lifelong permission to go after Johnny – Johnny, these days a 50-year-old alcoholic hanging onto life by a fingernail, yet still making these endearing, earnest efforts to get out of his own way and love himself enough to love others. If Danny LaRusso has become the bully *now*, was he ever The Hero? And, if Johnny Lawrence – “Sweep the leg, Johnny” – if Johnny Lawrence is the underdog now, was he ever, really, The Bully?

So, for us who sincerely want to follow the model of Jesus, we cannot start with these hyperbolic scenarios – neither Jesus’ call to 77, nor the 1984 All Valley Karate Tournament in Reseda. As Mr. Miyagi would certainly tell us, we must train ourselves first and practice mercy – *practice* mercy – beginning with the relationships we have before us in the right here and right now.

If you live with anyone ... or if you work with anyone ... or if you go to church with anyone ... if you share enough time with *anyone*, I am confident you will come to know well enough that husband, or colleague, or committee co-chair that you can accurately identify and catalogue their faults ... perhaps even in alphabetical order, if so requested. In fact, in the same way long-married couples can finish one another’s sentences, you may well become able to anticipate your peer’s shortcomings even before they do and before they commit their offense:

“He’s gonna do it,” you think to yourself, “he’s going to leave his shoes right there under the chair like some magical shoe fairy flies into this house every night to pick them up and set them softly in his closet” ...

or, “Here we go again, promising she’s going to call those vendors, when I know she’s going to get distracted, and it’s going be me, on the telephone – again – Friday afternoon, tying up every loose end she’s left frayed.”

And on, and on, and on.

For us who want to follow in the model of Jesus, extraordinary mercy begins *here*, in these most *ordinary* moments: resisting both those transparently passive-aggressive digs (“Oh, did you want me to turn off the basement light before we go to bed?”) and *all* mean-spirited barbs, and, instead, **devoting ourselves to the nurture of affection before indignation** ... *devoting ourselves to the nurture of affection before indignation*.

You know, instead of empowering the Lloyd Doblens,^x Samantha Bakers,^x and Duckie Dales,^{xi} did all those 1980s dramas, instead, grant us permission to judge the world in terms far too simple? Let the prophesy of the *Cobra Kai* work on *you* in this way! And when we find ourselves tempted to classify someone else based on a single interaction, or an isolated detail, or an individual behavior, in our best Admiral Akbar, we should hear, “It’s a trap!” For, likely, we’re only projecting our own insecurities, flattening human interaction into an echo chamber of smug retweets and clever gifs.

Importantly, we must not found this relentless love and pursuit of one another on an unrelated assemblage of isolated injunctions. Rather, we must always set Jesus’ teachings – and our living – in larger contexts: the home we make ... the character of the Christian community ... and, eventually, the reconciliation of the whole cosmos. Thereby, we seek to live *whole lives* ... of patience and grace ... of honesty and forgiveness ... **of affection rather than indignation** – 7 times 70 times 700 – not so that we might be holier than our neighbor, but so the whole world might be redeemed.

If instead of holding in common a series of legal agreements or merely demanding an individualized spiritual, or a political, or a philosophical purity ... if, instead, we would bind ourselves to one another *by* love and *with* the presence of God – well, then the Kingdom might come – and this house? Well it might become a *home* for our faith.

That we would love so well,
I pray in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Amen.

ⁱ C'mon, people, stay with me here: this is Christopher Lloyd as Dr. Emmett Brown in 1985's *Back To The Future*.

ⁱⁱ This is a Han Solo (Harrison Ford) deadpan from any number of *Star Wars* scenes.

ⁱⁱⁱ Man – from one of the toughest scenes of my childhood: the closing scene of 1982's *Star Trek II: Wrath Of Khan*, when Spock gives his life to save the Enterprise crew. When the dying Spock stands to greet Kirk, he struggles to his feet and straightens his uniform – such dignity! I thought my heart was going to rip in two when he says to the Captain, “I am, and shall always be, your friend.”

^{iv} While I would include *The Karate Kid* movies in that “solidly-PG” group, *Cobra Kai* is much rougher around the edges, both in language and themes – parents, take heed!

^v So, when *The Karate Kid* was released in 1984, Pat Morita (who played Mr. Miyagi), was 52. In *Cobra Kai*, first released in 2018, Ralph Macchio was 57 ... 5 years older!

^{vi} “Different But Same.” *Cobra Kai*. Season One: Episode Nine, starring Ralph Macchio and William Zabka. 2018. While there are other flashback moments in the series, I draw this exchange from Episode Nine, expanding the dialogue slightly to provide context.

^{vii} Matthew 18:21.

^{viii} Matthew 18:22.

^{ix} John Cusack's character in *Say Anything*, 1985.

^x Molly Ringwald's character in *Sixteen Candles*, 1984.

^{xi} Jon Cryer's character in *Pretty In Pink*, 1986. My favorite 80s movie, and the best 80s soundtrack. The Smiths' closer on that album has watered my hope for the universe during these last 35 years.