

Elusive Grace

*Loving Your Enemies While
Striving for God's Justice*

Scott Black Johnston

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Foreword

Barbara Brown Taylor

The twenty-first century has been hard on Protestant mainline churches. Well before the pandemic of the 2020s put the body of Christ in isolation for two long years, that body was already weakened by declining numbers, denominational battles over human sexuality, and increasing division along social and political lines that deepened with the presidential election of 2016. As the time came to emerge from quarantine, the refrain I heard most often from congregations and their pastors was, “How do you go forward without a map?”

This book is Scott Black Johnston’s answer to that question. From his clear-sighted reading of the present situation, based on religious awakenings of the past, to his farsighted vision of how a decentered church might bring its gifts to the public square, he places his faith in a compass, not a map. The points on that compass are seven ancient Christian virtues, and seven core practices of love that Jesus taught. While there may be nothing surprising about those markers, there is a surprising lot to learn from the way that Scott brings each of them to life.

Since one of his goals is to support a diverse congregation in loving enemies as well as friends, he leads the way by giving opponents airtime in his teaching. He presents their viewpoints without rancor. He does not reduce them to cardboard villains. This is so different from cancel culture that it feels dangerous, which is at least part of the point. To cross boundaries of party loyalty in order to befriend the enemy is to risk making enemies of your friends, as Scott discovers on page 1.

His skill at listening to all parties brings the elusive grace of his title into the picture. He listens to his congregation as well as he listens to the city in which both he and they live. He listens to Scripture, to popular

culture, to great literature, to wisdom from the street. In what other recent book have you found Lin-Manuel Miranda and Ben Franklin in the same sentence? By connecting voices from different centuries and diverse perspectives, Scott not only proves what a comprehensive thinker he is; he also enlarges the reader's sense of what it means to be human.

Of course he is a great storyteller. Of course he is a seasoned rhetorician. He knows how to describe our reality so accurately that we trust him. Then he knows how to shift our viewpoint so that we see something we could not see before. Finally, he returns our trust by letting us decide what to do with this new outlook. James Baldwin put it like this: "The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter even by a millimeter the way people look at reality, then you can change it."¹

Scott can do that, but the reason it works is because his energy for change comes from a spacious heart. His care for the healing of other hearts—including the heart of the nation—comes through on every page, dissolving the usual distinction between pastoral and prophetic speech. A focus on justice and justice alone can produce injustice, he warns, especially when it runs on the fuel of self-righteousness. The divine challenge is to commit to both justice and grace, which requires a deep cleaning of our own houses before we volunteer our services to others. The question is not whether people of faith *should* engage in the moral conversations of our day, but *how*.

Every reader will have a favorite part of this book. Mine is the final section, in which Scott turns his attention from the classic teachings of Christian faith to their embodiment in Christian community. He is still using a trusty compass instead of rushing a premature map, but his verb tense noticeably changes. If the re- words of his first two sections (*reclaiming* and *retraining*) flow from the past, the re- word of the third section (*regarding*) flows toward the future. The key word is *will*, both as verb and as noun. What role will the church play in the rapid climate change of American politics and culture?

Scott is under no illusion that mainline Protestant churches can (or should) regain their dominance as primary mediators of moral debate in this country. To head in that direction is to ignore the reasons why we lost our authority and to sidestep our chance to be made new. Scott is more interested in what a "humble and hungry" church can bring to a table that has moved from the sanctuary to the social movements of our time. When he says he believes churches are being called to embrace our decentered position, I am all ears. This sounds exciting, after so many years

of mourning central losses. I became Christian in the first place because I liked being with the eccentrics I found in church (including Jesus).

William Temple, who was archbishop of Canterbury in the years leading up to World War II, is often quoted as having said that the church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. That saying could serve as an epigraph to Scott's whole book. Making his case for Christian community, he says church is where we learn virtues and engage practices with bottom-up power to enrich civic lives as well as religious ones. These include faith in the goodness of diversity, commitment to serving others, and a habit of mutual respect. Before we try to export these values, however, we must bring them to life in our own congregations, which can be very hard to do.

For those who are still looking for such a community, take heart: you have already found a pastor in this book.

Acknowledgments

This project began as an invitation from President Theodore J. Wardlaw, the trustees, and the faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary to prepare the 2021 Thomas W. Currie Lectures. It was a straight-up honor to deliver these lectures—even remotely, in the midst of a pandemic. Austin Seminary is dear to me.

Beginning in 1993, and for ten years thereafter, Austin Seminary was my employer. It also happened to be a remarkable community of inquiry and care. Dedicated teachers, robust scholarship, and vital worship made my time at Austin Seminary feel like the proverbial plunge into deep clover.

I learned so much about the Bible, about theology, about worship, about church, and about life from my students and my colleagues. Austin Seminary wrote on my heart with indelible ink, and I will always be grateful.

This project was nurtured and encouraged by Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, the remarkably diverse and faithfully engaged community alongside whom I am blessed to serve. As we say in worship every Sunday, “We don’t all look alike, we don’t all think alike,” and yet somehow the Spirit has done the impossible: it has woven the ties that bind. I am continually humbled by this congregation’s courage, its dedication to service and the arts, and its faith—a faith that (like New York City itself) is resilient, challenging, willing to change, and (at its core) surprisingly tender. I will go to my grave loving these people.

In this book, I try to describe an approach to pursuing God’s justice that also embraces God’s grace. The attitude I prescribe, the compass points I try to define, result from a lifetime of conversations.

I am so grateful to Wallace Alston, Fred Anderson, J. C. Austin, Thomas Are Jr., Craig Barnes, Nell Black, Carl Bottenfield, the Brothers of Job,

Walter Brueggemann, Erskine Clark, Joe Clifford, Carol J. Cook, Joshua Davidson, Andy Dearman, Lewis Donelson, Kate Dunn, Buddy Ennis, Ismael García, William Greenway, Shirley Guthrie, Stanley R. Hall, Michael Jenkins, W. Stacy Johnson, Shannon Johnson Kershner, Cleophus LaRue, Myron Lewijkie, Michael Lindvall, Robert Martin, Oscar McCloud, Alyce McKenzie, Laura Mendenhall, William Muehl, Agnes Norfleet, Patrick O'Connor, Pen Peery, Charlene Han Powell, Victor Preller, Werner Ramirez, Stephen Breck Reid, Cindy Rigby, Paul Roberts, Robert M. Shelton, Doug Thorpe, Nora Tubbs Tisdale, Jon Walton, Ted Wardlaw, Leon Watts, Randy Weber, and Brad Wigger.

This cloud of witnesses has blessed me—often by disagreeing with me! Every one of these contemporary saints shared critical perspectives that expanded my own narrow take on life and faith, and, mercifully, they managed to make me laugh and love Christian community even more along the way. I am so grateful.

Over the years, three persons have exemplified the sort of preaching and writing for the church I find most nourishing: Fred B. Craddock, Thomas G. Long, and Barbara Brown Taylor. You are my homiletical trinity. I cannot imagine my faith or my work apart from your profound voices. Thank you.

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Among many other things, my family is a moral classroom. Izzy and Ollie, I never imagined that children could (so quickly, so skillfully, and so compassionately) become teachers to their parents, but you have. Thank you for your persistent guidance, mercy, and so, so much laughter.

Amy, my beloved, you make grace less elusive. I dedicate this book to you.

Introduction

In 2017, on a January morning, I received an email from a fellow Presbyterian pastor. I don't know this member of the clergy personally, but she is my colleague in ministry. She had just read a short piece in the *Christian Century* magazine that included a picture of me with my friend, the Rev. Patrick O'Connor. She wrote, "I am looking at your smiling faces in the *Christian Century*, and they are making me physically sick. I want to vomit."

It wasn't (I hope) our "smiling faces" so much as the accompanying article that turned my colleague's stomach. The magazine reported that Patrick and I had paid a call on then president-elect Donald Trump. We were in a unique position, we two. I am the senior pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in midtown Manhattan, just one block south of Trump Tower. The former president's office looks right down upon our brownstone sanctuary. Patrick is the senior pastor of the vibrant and diverse congregation at First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, where Trump was baptized. With these connections, we knew we had an opportunity to get a meeting, and we believed we had a moral obligation to do so. In our ten-minute audience, we spoke with the president-elect about the challenges facing our nation, and we prayed together for the broken places in our country.¹

Patrick and I took all sorts of grief for that meeting. We fielded criticisms from colleagues who described our brief time with Trump either as a vile, fame-seeking exercise, or as providing legitimacy to a miscreant. Many people felt hurt by our actions. And they returned the favor. They crafted emails meant to wound. Friends and family loved us through it, and the furor abated over time. But the experience taught me

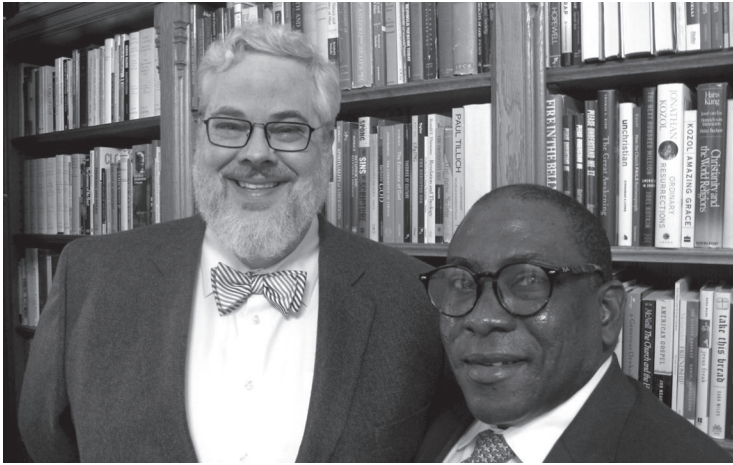


Figure 1. The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston and the Rev. Patrick O'Connor. Photo by Vasheena Brisbane. © 2017, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Used with permission.

something most contemporary teenagers know quite well: being exposed to a social media wolf pack is no fun. It also made clear to me that, for many people, righteous anger excuses bad behavior.

Curiously, few critics expressed interest in the content of our prayer. As we bowed our heads with Donald Trump, what did we say to the Almighty? “Deliver us, loving God, from rancor and cynicism,” we prayed. “Encourage us to kindness. Teach us to mend the tattered places in this society. Give us hope and holy perspective for the living of these days.”² Sadly, in the years that followed, the Trump administration ushered in a season of history frequently characterized by the exact opposite of what Patrick and I had raised up in our prayer. Trump’s myriad transgressions awakened the country to unresolved sins in our body politic, forcing us to reckon with racism, misogyny, and xenophobia with unprecedented tenacity. Rancor and cynicism grew. Kindness was locked in a cage. Divisions increased between the hard-line right and the “woke” left. In a 2018 piece in *New York* magazine, the author and social commentator Andrew Sullivan gave a name to our current cultural moment: “The Great Awakening.”³

Sullivan’s assessment is based on an old argument: religion is inescapable. Everyone, he asserted, relies on “gods” (small *g*), those practices and patterns that give meaning and contour to our lives. The irony of the present moment, Sullivan observed, is that while our culture has largely

abandoned the traditional practices of faith, we have not abandoned our religious impulses. Instead, we have transplanted our search for meaning and our yearning for morality to new soil: modern politics. Our culture is consumed with fighting an endless series of secular battles that both the left and the right wage with quasi-religious speech. Sullivan suggested that this anxious and angry moment in American history has parallels to episodes of religious revival early in this country's history.

Sullivan made me think: Are we in the midst of a new season of vibrant moral questioning—a “Great Awakening”? If so, how should people of faith participate? Can we join the scrum and address the critical ethical issues of this moment while simultaneously holding onto Christ's most difficult commands: “Love your neighbor” and “Love your enemy”? From my office on Fifth Avenue, in the shadow of Trump Tower, I have asked myself this last question repeatedly. It is the question this book attempts to answer.

Awakening movements—times of spiritual revival, when entire segments of a society rapidly embrace passionate forms of belief—have been around for a long time. In American religion, historians point to two movements in particular: the First Great Awakening (1730–50) and the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840). These vibrant movements can help us understand the “Awakening” unfolding in our midst.

In June 1719, Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, a pastor from the Netherlands, arrived in central New Jersey to serve four small yoked Dutch parishes. Frelinghuysen found his new parishioners to be in sad spiritual shape. They were placid in church and morally loose outside of it. They saw no connection between Sunday's yawn-inducing worship services and the actual lives they lived. Challenging their lackluster faith, Frelinghuysen preached that to be truly saved a person must experience a visible conversion. Riffing on the story of the prodigal son, the Dutch pastor promised that “Jesus still stands with extended arms to gather you,” but you must “be willing . . . to arise and come to Jesus.”⁴

Frelinghuysen's come-to-Jesus sermons were a shock to these self-satisfied Dutch Calvinists. *How dare a pastor address the chosen as sinners?* Surprisingly, though, Frelinghuysen's congregations began to grow. Other preachers began to hold forth on sin and the fires of hell with similar fervor. The only way to escape God's wrath, they declared, was spiritual conversion—a conversion that gave rise to a moral awakening. Throughout the First Great Awakening, enthusiasm for religion grew in this country. Church attendance went up. Moral conversations became common in the realm of public debate. In his autobiography, Benjamin

Franklin wrote that “it seemed as if all the world were growing religious.”⁵ This newfound religiosity had ripple effects throughout colonial America. In speaking of a God who holds individuals accountable, preachers like Frelinghuysen and Jonathan Edwards contributed to broad cultural conversations about individual rights and responsibilities, conversations that would eventually lead to the authoring of the Declaration of Independence and the fighting of the Revolutionary War.

But not everyone embraced the fiery emotionalism of the awakening preachers. Many wondered if this new breed of clergy had sacrificed a God of grace to proclaim a God of wrath. Congregations divided over this concern, leading to a broader schism in the American church. Debates became increasingly bitter, with each side accusing the other of heresy.⁶ Historians trace the roots of the modern evangelical movement to these colonial-era schisms. The First Great Awakening was both a time of fervent moral conversation and a season of painful division in American religious communities.

The Second Great Awakening gave rise to a similar dynamic. In the early 1800s, the Second Great Awakening blossomed as American territory rapidly expanded westward (at the expense of Indigenous populations). The settling of wide swaths of America brought new churches and a new approach to preaching. One of the preachers giving fresh voice to the call for moral renewal was Charles Grandison Finney. Based in New York, at the 2,400-seat Broadway Tabernacle, Finney was such a popular revival preacher that when he traveled to camp meetings in Pennsylvania or Delaware, local shopkeepers would close their stores. Everyone would head down by the river to hear Finney drop the hammer.

Finney’s sermons echoed the theology of the First Great Awakening. He preached against sin and the threat of damnation, while exhorting the contemporary church to get busy and light a fire under recalcitrant souls.⁷ The sins Finney expected churches to tackle, however, were somewhat different from those described by the first wave of revivalists. Preachers in the Second Great Awakening criticized alcohol as a blight on humanity and joined forces with the emerging temperance movement. Finney identified slavery as America’s “greatest sin” and refused to allow slaveholders to take Communion. He also preached about elevating rights for women as a way to transform society.

This emphasis on corporate responsibility imbued the Second Great Awakening with a decidedly egalitarian flavor. More and more laity began to step up and take on the preaching mantle, testifying at camp meetings against society’s moral ills and calling people to repentance.

Many believe the Second Great Awakening planted the seeds for what we now call the social gospel movement.

There are important parallels between our current cultural moment and the first two Great Awakenings. Our society is again engaged in impassioned conversations that aim to identify and unpack our corporate moral failings. Individuals are being challenged to be moral agents, pushing back against systemic wrongs. This was true of the Second Great Awakening; it is also true of the Me Too movement and Black Lives Matter. While there is not a whole lot of preaching about hell and damnation going on right now, there are striking parallels in modern discourse. Some, like Sullivan, argue that “cancel culture” has become our society’s version of hellfire. In ostracizing and silencing those who do not hew to the party line, cancel culture is not a purely political phenomenon or a tactic embraced solely by the left. We see it whenever contemporary communities seek to purge moral impurity or philosophical disagreement from their ranks. Finally, in ways that parallel past awakenings, the fervor of the current moment, with its frequent declarations of moral turpitude, is creating schism. Movements and individual institutions (including churches) are fracturing, and fracturing again, as they attempt to process these critical moral issues.

Despite these similarities, though, our current awakening differs from the spiritual movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in one important way: While those early awakenings began in the church, the Great Awakening is rooted in secular movements. It is being talked about in churches, and it is influencing our religious vocabulary, but it did not arise out of a theological impulse, and most of the time it does not seem interested in pursuing one. For me, this provokes a whole flock of questions. Can churches tap into the moral urgency of the Great Awakening and imbue it with a spiritual core? Can people of faith be both agents of change and voices of healing? Or will churches succumb to ideological schisms and allow angry, partisan rhetoric to dominate our discourse?

In the fallout from Patrick’s and my visit with President-elect Trump, my congregation taught me something basic and precious: most parishioners want their clergy to do the right thing, and they are willing to dialogue and strategize with pastors about what that means. In some of the most powerful one-on-one meetings I have ever had in ministry, I listened to women describe the pain that came on learning that their pastor had met with someone who described, on tape and with no apparent remorse, his assaults on women. I listened to them speak about experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault. These conversations were sacred. They

were complex. These courageous souls conveyed both moral urgency and a compassionate faith. They spoke the gospel.

The pastoral conversations I have had in the midst of the Great Awakening have reshaped my approach to ministry and preaching. They remind me how incredibly challenging it can be to hold onto, simultaneously, the core teachings of our faith: What does it look like to embrace both justice and love? How can you call for repentance and work toward reconciliation? And, like the preachers of the first two Great Awakenings, I find myself reflecting again and again on that grandmother of all theological words: grace. Grace is an incredibly important but sadly elusive notion right now. It feels nigh on impossible, in the context of the Great Awakening, to work through complicated ethical issues and craft plans for systemic change without getting crosswise with each other, and without causing each other pain. Still, our faith calls us to try—to get in the mix and bring to the table both a commitment to truth and a commitment to grace.

In this precarious moment, I believe that people of faith, and individual churches, can contribute to a national revival. At their best, healthy, engaged congregations model civic virtues like diverse community, life-changing service, and mutual respect. And yet, America's churches, synagogues, and mosques are not immune to the Great Awakening's self-righteousness, intemperate speech, and deep veins of distrust for our fellow citizens. If faith communities are to do our part toward healing the nation's soul, we must heal our own souls first.

This book makes frequent mention of certain issues at the heart of the Great Awakening (such as economic injustice, racism, and misogyny), but it does not provide a deep dive into—a focused theological analysis of—any of these critical topics. Many of the writers cited here, like Jia Tolentino and William Barber and so many more, are doing this mission-critical work, and the church is benefiting from their careful studies and keen insights. This book runs on a parallel track. It argues that in order to have the moral conversations we need to have right now, in order to make any sort of meaningful progress on these critical concerns, and yes, in order to receive the gifts the Spirit would offer us in this moment, people of faith must prepare ourselves.

At Fifth Avenue, we started down this track a few years ago, by turning our attention to a study of the classic Christian virtues. Christian virtues compel us to take up topics that matter in the world, but they also shape the way we engage in moral conversation. Dusting off these ancient practices of the heart was like setting a moral compass alongside the complicated map of the times.

Of course, nothing tests the seven heavenly virtues quite like the seven deadly sins. In the midst of the Great Awakening, righteous anger looks to be our most intractable enemy. Anger may spur us to action, but it cannot teach us to love. In the lead-up to the 2020 election, I reminded our congregation, “Our hearts are capable of amazing things—luminous things. Before we can get there, though, we have to clean house. We have to sweep out interlopers who have taken up residence in our chest: the lusts, the hatreds, and yes, the anger that controls our days.” To make a meaningful contribution to today’s most challenging ethical conversations, we (congregations and the church at large) must first confess our anger, our pride, and our ethical apathy. Only then can we hope to approach the Great Awakening with what the psalmist calls “a clean heart” and a right and renewed spirit (Psalm 51). God calls us to engage the ethical issues of our time with critical candor and holy passion, but also with self-awareness, humility, and love.

This book presents three interrelated studies aimed at preparing us to wrestle honestly, faithfully, and lovingly with the issues of our time.

The first study—*Reclaiming Virtue*—focuses on the seven heavenly virtues. In so many ways, these virtues form the core of the wisdom that the Christian tradition has to offer to the world in this contentious time.

The second study—*Retraining Our Hearts*—presents seven ways of cultivating the core practices (loving God, loving your neighbor, loving your enemy) taught by Jesus. These habits provide the bedrock for ethical Christian living and should shape our encounters with one another.

The third study—*Regarding the Church*—makes a case for Christian community. Specifically, it explores the unique strengths that churches bring to the public square, strengths that will help us to reclaim civic virtue; restore graciousness, dignity, and respect to human interaction; and encourage us to have the hard conversations that will ultimately reknit the fabric of our society.

It is my hope that these studies will not only inspire us to recommit to the highest of Christian principles, but will also turn hearts poisoned by cynicism into instruments of love. In this way, a nation broken by partisanship, reeling from racial strife, and still counting its losses to a terrible pandemic may finally begin to heal.

Study 1

Reclaiming Virtue

In 1922, the city of New York installed a commissioned sculpture and fountain called *Civic Virtue Triumphant over Unrighteousness*. The sculpture, which featured one male and two female figures, stood outside City Hall for two decades before Mayor Fiorello La Guardia (who detested the male nude he called “Fat Boy”) banished it to Queens. In 2012 the sculpture was relocated again, to a cemetery in Brooklyn, where it now resides.¹

As a public artwork, *Civic Virtue Triumphant* was never very popular, in part because its depiction of vice and corruption as females was considered misogynistic. Still, its exile to Green-Wood Cemetery poses an obvious, yet highly relevant, question: Is civic virtue dead?

Maybe not, but it’s most certainly taken a hit. In January 2021, as the nation’s executive branch changed hands, a policy scholar at a Washington think tank called for “a renewed dedication to civic virtue.” Brink Lindsey, vice president of the Niskanen Center, wrote that “some level of virtue among both leaders and ordinary citizens is necessary for self-government to be sustainable. And in the present day, it is painfully evident that our republic is suffering from a lack of civic virtue at all levels.”²

The notion of civic virtue—everything from hard work and thrift to patriotism and civility—is rooted in Western philosophy. Civic virtues prescribe how human beings should behave and treat one another in order to create a healthy and productive society. In this, civic virtues are both similar to, and different from, Christian virtues. Christian virtues

guide us not just in how we relate to one another, but also in how we relate to God. Get them right, and these virtues will ensure not only a healthy society, but a satisfying and beautiful life as well.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, written 350 years before Christ, is one of the most important philosophical books in history. Aristotle set out to answer a core question: "How should we best live?" He identified four virtues, or dispositions, essential to living a good and ethical life: temperance, justice, prudence (or wisdom), and courage. The early church adopted the virtues first identified by Aristotle and added three more—faith, hope, and love. Roman Catholic doctrine defines these virtues as "stable dispositions of the intellect and the will that govern our acts, order our passions, and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith."³

This study treats the seven virtues as the starting point for restoring our communities and redeeming our souls. We'll approach this study in a variety of ways. We'll consider basic definitions (what is "temperance" anyway?), along with the perspectives from ancient Greece down to today. Where virtues are difficult to put into words, we'll look for them in the work of painters and storytellers. I've always found it touching that Aristotle bestowed his famous book on ethics as a gift to his young son, Nicomachus. And so I've framed my reflection on faith as a letter to my own son, Oliver.

Mostly, though, we will rely on Scripture. We will explore how the virtues find expression in our sacred texts and religious traditions. We will look not only to wisdom literature, but also to the parables of Jesus and the letters of Paul, for insight into living faithful and beautiful lives.

Who knows? With practice, we may make virtue triumphant again.

Temperance: Dousing the Flames

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

—1 Corinthians 9:19–23

Benjamin Franklin. That's my answer.

If you were to ask me to pick another early American to get the Lin-Manuel Miranda treatment—to have his brilliant ideas, personal ambitions, and conspicuous flaws set to hip-hop—it would be Ben Franklin. Franklin was a fascinating man. He was a publisher, a diplomat, a musician, and an inventor. In addition to inventing the glass harmonica and bifocal glasses, Franklin attached curved pieces of wood to the bottom of his armchair and created . . . the rocking chair!

He was a notorious ladies' man, known for seeking out intelligent women and carrying on long, flirtatious conversations with them. He was an innovator in business. Franklin started the first insurance company in the American colonies, the Philadelphia Contributorship for the Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire. He was a volunteer fireman, too. This was particularly fitting because Franklin was often, in his experiments, setting

things ablaze. Once, attempting to determine if electricity could kill a turkey, Franklin nearly electrocuted himself.⁴

Franklin was also keenly interested in virtue. At the tender age of twenty, Franklin wrote down thirteen virtues—thirteen moral habits to shape his days. The first virtue on his list—the virtue on which he felt all other virtues depended—was temperance.

Temperance is a governor. It curbs the passions. To Franklin, a portly man who enjoyed his food and especially his beer, temperance cautioned against overindulgence. “Eat not to dullness,” wrote Franklin, “drink not to elevation.”⁵ Still, temperance was more than a diet plan for the hundred-dollar founding father; it was an approach to life. Franklin had ambition for himself and lofty goals for his new country. He knew that without self-discipline—if he spent every afternoon in the pub—his hopes and goals would float out of reach. “Temperance,” Franklin wrote in his popular journal, *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, “puts wood on the fire, meal in the barrel, flour in the tub, money in the purse, credit in the country, contentment in the house, clothes on the back, and vigor in the body.”⁶

All of that makes temperance sound sensible, if perhaps a bit stern. *Don’t eat that cookie! Don’t have that second (or is it your third?) martini! Less is more!* Is that all temperance is—a virtuous scolding? Is temperance the finger-wagging cop of the moral universe?

To answer, let’s start with a confession. Franklin was right: Our appetites can get the best of us. They can consume us. They can destroy us. We know this. We also know the places in our lives where we seem to have little or no control. As a pastor, I encounter the classic addictions all the time: alcoholism, drugs, gambling. But it doesn’t stop there. The handbook used by most mental health professionals in this country is *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—the DSM. In addition to addictions to substances like alcohol and drugs, the DSM now describes other types of addictive behaviors. Included on the list are video game addiction, pornography addiction, internet/mobile device addiction, shopping addiction, exercise addiction, and even tanning addiction.

So many addictive behaviors! The ones that don’t personally tempt us might seem silly, but the ones that call out to us, that have ensnared us in the past (or that hold us in their claws even now), are serious. They sap our energy, soak up our resources, and sabotage our relationships. It takes hard work, personal commitment, and a supportive community to face down addiction. It requires a combination of counseling, medical expertise, earnest prayer, support groups, and twelve-step programs. No

one's path toward wholeness is the same. Yet everyone is reaching for the same brass ring: temperance.

The Greek philosopher Plato believed that the first step toward temperance was to “know yourself.” Know who you are. You are more than your knee-jerk compulsions and momentary obsessions. You are more than a set of raw appetites. “You are,” he famously argued, “*spirit!*”⁷ The Christian faith concurs. The first question in the Presbyterian catechism is “Who are you?” The answer we give: “I am a child of God.” Embracing this identity, we take a step toward temperance and happiness. These attitudes go hand in hand, for the goal of temperance is *not* to deprive people of fun. On the contrary, temperance prods us (bundles of need and addiction that we are) toward joy.

Here's how it works: Temperance elbows us. *Hey you! Be honest—really honest—with yourself. Does lasting happiness ever come from satisfying a momentary hunger?* Nope, says Plato. Not a chance, says the catechism. Joy—quiet, grounded, enduring joy—comes from realizing, from leaning into, from accepting, who you truly are. *You* are God's beloved child, and *you* have a sacred purpose in this world.

In the ancient world, temperance was usually depicted as a woman holding a pitcher of water and a goblet of wine. She pours the water from her pitcher into the wine, diluting it. The symbolism was straightforward—less wine, more water. Temperance. In the nineteenth century, the artist Edward Burne-Jones took a more subtle approach. In his painting of Temperance, we see a threat. Flames lick around Temperance's feet. They could easily catch her gown on fire and consume her. Instead, Temperance calmly pours water from her jug to extinguish the flames. Temperance, as Burne-Jones depicts her, is self-possessed. The flames do not panic her. The fire does not control her. She is calm. She is responsive. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could channel this sort of confident tranquility when the fires lash at us? Temperance doesn't freak. She doesn't cave. She knows who she is.

So did the apostle Paul. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul defends himself from critics who accused him of engaging in an unprincipled ministry. Surely, they complained, “this gospel you proclaim must have a single audience in mind. Look at you. You are all over the place. You talk to Jews and Gentiles. You talk to vegetarians and meat-eaters. You talk to Roman pagans and Corinthian libertines. You are a gadfly. You are a carpetbagger. You're a spineless evangelist telling people what you think they want to hear. You are a chameleon in a cheap suit who will say anything to make a sale.”



Figure 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *Temperantia*, 1872.

Nodding, the apostle says, in effect, “You got me. I *have* been hanging out with all of these people. I have been talking their talk, drinking their wine, listening to their worries, and rooting for their basketball teams. I have been all things to all people. Guilty as charged. Now, ask me why. Why have I contorted myself day after day? Why have I inserted myself into the middle of all these different people’s lives?”

“I’ll tell you why,” he continues. “I did it only and always for the sake of the gospel.”

A little over twenty years ago, I was sitting in a faculty meeting where we were debating a matter of great theological importance: should the faculty wear robes when preaching in the chapel? The argument went back and forth. Biblical texts and Reformed tradition were invoked. Everyone was making their case—everyone except my friend and colleague Stacy. He was quietly reading a book. This seemed to annoy the dean. Eventually, he called on Stacy. “What does our professor of theology think?”

“I think,” said Stacy with a shrug, “that this is all *adiaphora*.”

Adiaphora, a fancy and extremely useful Latin term, means an action that morality neither mandates nor forbids. The clergy at

my church wear purple stoles during the season of Lent. So do many other Christian clergy. Does God care about this? Is this morally significant? No. It is *adiaphora*. Do it, don’t do it. It is not a concern to God.

Paul’s critics say, “Hey, you’ve got to choose a side in the world’s conflicts. One side must be right, the other side must be wrong. Are you with the Jews or the Gentiles? Are you with the meat-eaters or the vegetarians? You cannot hop back and forth. There are chasms between these people. You must choose, Paul.”

“Hang on a minute,” says Paul, looking up from his book. “I don’t care about the old divides. I don’t care what color jersey people are wearing,

what political party sends them email, or what line you drew in the sand this morning. I don't care. And I don't think God cares, either. If you think my job is to choose a side and refight the same old battles, then I must look pretty darn ineffective. Does it look like I am missing the target? Like I am boxing the air? I get that. But here's the thing: where you see chasms, I see people hungry for good news. What if the fights you want me to have are not the important ones? What if our current conflicts are not nearly as important as people think? What if God wants us to reach out and save people no matter who they are?"

The apostle Paul is engaging in temperance. Temperance, as Franklin argued, is personal restraint. It is an individual moderating the intake of alcohol and cookies for the sake of her health. But it doesn't stop there. Temperance was Franklin's approach to what he put in his mouth *and* to what came out of his mouth. It governed his eating *and* his speaking *and* his acting. Temperance calls us all to speak with charity and to act with respect. It calls us to debate with integrity and humility. Temperance is not simply a nice-to-have virtue; it is essential for a healthy culture. Without humble engagement, without temperance, our ability to talk with each other, to care about and for each other, and to work together for the common good atrophies.

The body politic, like the human body, is a fragile and vulnerable thing. That's why Burne-Jones depicts Temperance standing at the gate, calmly pouring water on the flames that would set the fabric of our society ablaze. We need some of that cool water right now. More and more, it feels as though we Americans, along with our elected officials, have lost our collective temper. And yes, the words have the same root. *Temper. Temperance.* To lose your *temper* is to lose restraint in public. To lose *temperance* is to abandon healthy dialogue and the hope for a middle ground, to descend into endless, pointless cycles of blame.

Without temperance's cooling waters, we drink from the intoxicating jug of self-righteousness. *We are right. They are wrong.* Without temperance, there are no shared victories, no community triumphs. Instead, we bitterly celebrate our enemies' incompetence and failures. Without temperance, angry social media posts and belligerent tweets come to dominate the conversation. Without temperance, people are reduced to caricatures: they are either good or bad, worth saving or easily written off. Without temperance, everyone on the other side of a contentious issue looks like a mustache-twirling villain. Without temperance, the flames at our feet grow ever higher.

Does temperance have a chance for a comeback in today's world?

A colleague once forwarded to me a blog post by the marketing guru Seth Godin, a set of instructions on how to engage one another around controversial issues. It was called "How to Be Heard." But it could just as well have been titled "How to Be Temperate." Here are some of the actions Godin advises if you want to be heard:

- Do your homework.
- Stow the snark.
- Respect the other side.
- Seek shared values.
- Tell the truth.⁸

In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul says, in essence, "Listen, I see the same fault lines in the world that you see, but I am not interested in fighting those old battles. I am a child of God, and so are you. We have got to get busy. There is a race to be run, truth to be told, love to be shared."

Paul is right. Time is a-wasting. God is calling. The world needs saving. It needs temperance. It needs people willing to engage each other with humility, compassion, and charity. It needs people willing to join the conversation armed with jugs of clear, cool water.

Justice: Banging on the Door

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

—Luke 18:1–8

It’s not fair.” Two children in front of me in the park were arguing over whose turn it was to hold the leash of their new puppy. “Mommomm . . . [three syllables at least, *Mommomm* . . .] Macie’s had Cooper forever. It’s not fair!”

We have all uttered that phrase at some point in our lives. I’ll bet that within the last twenty-four hours every one of us has looked at some aspect of our lives or the world around us and thought, “It’s not fair!” We humans are hardwired to look for injustice. Psychologists tell us that once children hit the age of four or five, they begin to notice inequalities. Children find these disparities to be both confusing and upsetting. *Why does my older brother have a different bedtime from me? Why do I have carrot sticks in my lunch when all the other kids have cookies?* Children’s questions

about inequality start simple, but as they experience more of the world (and their place in it), their inquiries grow more complicated. *Why did the tooth fairy bring my friend Sydney a twenty-dollar bill, and I only got a quarter? Why is Jimmy so good at math, and I'm not?*

Our sensitivity to the disparities we see in the world eventually morphs into a wider and more complicated discussion—a discussion about justice. What is justice, exactly? Are equality and justice the same thing? What might a just society look like? These questions are important, because justice is something that God loves. The psalms, the prophets, and the Gospels all describe the Almighty as a just and righteous God. In speaking to the prophet Isaiah, God says, “I the LORD love justice” (Isaiah 61:8). “The righteous LORD,” says Psalm 11:7 (NLT), “loves justice.” Over and over, Scripture tells us, God has a heart for justice. Do we?

To answer, let’s consider what our best thinkers over the centuries have said about justice. Let’s also consider what the Christian tradition has to say on the subject. Finally, let’s think about what it would look like to embrace God’s love for justice. We’ll start with Plato.

Three hundred years before Christ, Plato spent a good bit of time discussing the meaning of justice for Athenian society. To begin with, the philosopher recognized that all members of his society were not equal. Moreover, Plato did not believe that justice could (or should) eliminate inequality. To Plato, justice wasn’t about equality; justice was about harmony. A just culture was a peaceful society, where everyone understood and fulfilled their proper, if unequal, roles. To the question, “Why is Jimmy better at math than I am?” Plato would say, “That’s just the way it is. People have different abilities.” Most of us would agree with Plato—at least in part. We all have different talents, abilities, and interests. We teach basic math with no expectation that everyone will be able to do calculus. Any society that would try to flatten these differences, to iron them out, would be both boring and tyrannical. It would be unjust.

But Plato did not stop at aptitude in making a defense of inequality. He taught that people were inherently unequal in all sorts of ways. Women were not equal (were inferior) to men, slaves were not equal (were inferior) to free citizens, and so on. To Plato, a just society treated individuals in a manner befitting their unequal stations. In a just society, everyone was given their due.

Plato’s claim that human beings are by nature inherently unequal dominated Western thought for nearly two thousand years. It would undergird feudalism—peasants were not equal to their lords. It would

undergird the slave trade and various violent conflicts. It wasn't until the 1700s that Western intellectuals began a concerted pushback against Plato's thoughts about humanity. In doing so, they often appealed to a curious source: the Bible.

Some of the earliest and most important criticisms of Plato's view of humanity can be found in Scripture. In his Letter to the Galatians, for example, the apostle Paul writes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Here Paul upends the very inequalities Plato claimed had been chiseled into the structure of the universe. The inequalities you think are so permanent, Paul declares, have been vanquished by Jesus. We are all equal in the eyes of God.

Such declarations of equality echoed in an impure, not fully developed form in the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.⁹

Thomas Jefferson, of course, was not quite there yet. He did not think women or slaves or Native Americans were among those with "unalienable rights." There was still some Platonic prejudice clinging to his perspective. And yet, Jefferson was taking steps toward a radically new perspective, one that would sweep across the globe. This perspective insisted that all people—*all* people—are created equal, and that the role of a just society (and a just government) is to create a context in which these coequal citizens can be free to chase after happiness.

How should a society go about this important work? We are surrounded by all sorts of different answers to that critical question. A libertarian will respond by saying that a society is most just when it maximizes freedom. The authoritarian counters that a society is most just when it metes out appropriate punishment for crime. The communist says that a society is most just when everyone is given the same set of resources to make a life.

John Rawls was an American political philosopher and Harvard professor whose 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, has had more influence on modern conversations about justice than any other. In his book, Rawls argues that a just society will ensure basic rights, things like these:

1. Political liberties: freedom of speech and freedom of thought.
2. Equality before the law: who you are (and who you know) should not mean that you get special treatment in regard to the law of the land.
3. Equal access to the political system: one person, one vote.

Every society, Rawls thought, ought to ensure equal access to these basic freedoms. But what about economic and social inequalities? What should a just society do about such disparities? To respond, Rawls created one of the greatest thought experiments of all time. It is called the Veil of Ignorance, and it goes like this:

Imagine you haven't been born yet. Imagine you are floating above the planet, circling around it like an astronaut in orbit. You see the world in all its beauty and ugliness. You see wealth and privilege, poverty and pestilence. You see racism and cycles of abuse and addiction. You see fantastic universities, shiny cars, and fabulous clothes. You see people dining on lobster, and you see children eating dirt. Now, says Rawls, given that you do not know where you will be born, whether you will have flies circling around your head or a silver spoon stuck in your mouth, what changes would you make? How would you set up society? How would you make it more just?¹⁰

In running this experiment, Rawls is something of a realist. He argues that the complete elimination of inequality is impossible and may even be undesirable. You want to allow people the freedom to make choices about their careers and interests and how hard and how long they want to work. The result of these choices will produce inequalities. It is also true, Rawls argues, that inequality can sometimes (although not always) benefit those who have less economic and social capital. Imagine, he says, two different political and economic systems. One has complete equality, but everyone's standard of living is quite low. The other system has inequalities in it, but the people at the lowest rung of the ladder have a higher standard of living and greater access to opportunity than the society in which everyone is equal. Which society would you choose to be born into?

The thought experiment Rawls devised forces us to think about the people in the world whose lives are in the most precarious place, people with little or no access to economic or social opportunity. A just society, Rawls argues, focuses its attention on lifting the bottom rung.

Now, you might argue, we can do better than that. Many of today's political philosophers (Rawls died in 2002) make this case. But almost all of them start with Rawls.

Rawls is also not a bad place to begin for those of us who hail from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The law prescribed in the Old Testament encourages people to be gracious and fair in seeking justice. *Don't side with the majority simply because it would be to your advantage. Don't neglect to free a donkey caught in a thorny bush—even if that donkey belongs to someone you don't like. Be impartial. Don't give a person a break simply because they are poor or because they are rich. Hold everyone to high standards. Hold yourself to high standards. Do not oppress the resident alien, the immigrant, or a person with no financial resources and precious little opportunity.*

This theme recurs throughout Scripture. Those without access to the levers of the economy and those who face societal obstacles to getting ahead are given special status. They are often listed as a trinity: *Look after the widows, the orphans, and foreigners in your midst.* In the ancient world, these people—widows, orphans, and foreigners—faced tremendous challenges to survive, much less to get ahead. If you were circling the planet waiting to be born, you would not want to draw the short straw and end up a widow, an orphan, or a foreigner. True then, true now.

And yet, the Bible tells us, God holds this group of people especially close to the divine heart. The book of Deuteronomy declares that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and . . . loves the strangers” (Deuteronomy 10:18). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Truly, if you care for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, it is as if you were caring for me” (Matthew 25:40). In other words, before there was the Veil of Ignorance, there was God, directing our attention to those who struggle, encouraging us to strive for a just society by focusing on those in need.

This is our charge: We are called to help the least of our sisters and brothers. The Hebrew word for justice is *tsedeq*. God wants us to embrace *tsedeq*, the desire to make things right.

Sadly though, *tsedeq* does not always find room in our hearts. Justice can get crowded out by selfishness, narcissism, and a lack of empathy. We can convince ourselves that helping those in need means less for me and mine. Sometimes the barrier to justice is hard-heartedness, cynicism. *Nothing we do is going to make a difference.* I know a fellow who rolls his eyes whenever I start talking about justice. To him the concept is an excuse for tilting at windmills. Recently he said to me, “OK, do-gooder, tell me one thing, one world problem that humans have actually solved.” I paused, and then I said, “Smallpox. We eradicated smallpox.” He smiled. “OK, I’ll give you that. You can check that box. But Rev, the list of unchecked boxes is long—really long.”

Not long ago the *Wall Street Journal* reported that in the last twenty years, across the globe, the number of deaths of children under the age of five has dropped from sixty-nine per one thousand live births to thirty-nine per one thousand live births.¹¹ Prior to COVID-19, we cut it in half. The world made progress. The bad news is that there are still children dying because they lack food and basic health care. There is a band of countries in central Africa where, because of climate change and terrible droughts, failed governments, and persistent violence, it has been very difficult to move the needle. My cynical friend is right. The list is long. At times it can be difficult to see progress.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus shines a light on this reality. He tells a parable about a widow making an appeal to an unjust judge. She is trying to get an answer—to get some justice—from a magistrate who doesn't care. This judge has no regard for God or the plight of humankind. He is a cynic. A tool. He sold out a long time ago. Every day, the widow bangs on his door and asks for justice. Every day, he pours himself another glass of bourbon and ignores her pleas. Then, one day, the judge relents. He is worn down by her badgering. Jesus tells this story, says Luke, so that we will not lose heart.

The story makes so much sense. Those in pursuit of justice do encounter cynical, mean-spirited, just plain unresponsive folk. We are told no and no and no. Doors often stay closed. But do not lose heart, says Jesus. If your cause is just, God will eventually pierce even the hardest of hearts.

Hard hearts are not the only things that get in the way of justice. Sometimes the biggest impediment to justice is people who claim that they are all about justice. A friend of mine was once in a meeting listening to a presenter speak about how we often isolate ourselves with a tribal mentality. One of her listeners took umbrage at this language and called the presenter out. He claimed that she was a privileged person who had no right to use a Native American term like “tribal” in a derogatory manner. It was, he asserted, a justice issue. Someone else in the room wondered if the conversation might be turning anti-Semitic. After all, she was brought up to respect the twelve tribes of Israel. Someone else wondered if it might be possible that the word “tribe” could transcend different cultures. It was quite a kerfuffle. Accusations were made, feelings were hurt, apologies were issued. When it was over, some left feeling shame, guilt, and anger. I wonder, though, if justice was served.

In a piece published in the *New York Times*, Loretta Ross, an African American feminist scholar, argues that our call-out culture has gotten out of control. If we turn every awkward moment into a justice issue, she

wonders, are we trivializing and hindering the real and difficult work that needs to be done to bring about justice? Ross writes:

I, too, have been called out, usually for a prejudice I had against someone, or for using insensitive language that didn't keep up with rapidly changing conventions. That's part of everyone's learning curve, but I still felt hurt, embarrassed and defensive. . . .

The heart of the matter is, there is a much more effective way to build social justice movements. They happen in person, in real life.¹²

Patrisse Khan-Cullors, a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, writes, "People don't understand that organizing isn't going online and cussing people out or going to a protest and calling something out."¹³ Justice is about relationships. Those who are willing to bulldoze over other people in pursuit of justice inevitably hurt their cause. The widow banging on the unjust judge's door exhibits a different, but much more effective way.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian at Yale Divinity School who writes and teaches about justice. Volf grew up in a part of the former Yugoslavia that was occupied by Serbia. As a Protestant pastor, Volf was viewed with suspicion. He was repeatedly interrogated by Serbian forces. Eventually, his family and he had to flee, and their home was destroyed. Reflecting on that time years later, Volf writes, "If you want justice and nothing but justice, you will inevitably get injustice. If you want justice without injustice, you must want love."¹⁴

Volf makes a complicated and profound claim. To some, the pursuit of justice creates a broad license for bad behavior and aggressive tactics. We see this all the time. *Yes, I am behaving badly, but it's because I care so much!* This tit-for-tat, retributive mind-set, Volf argues, will have consequences. "If you want justice and nothing but justice, you will inevitably get injustice." Too often, people, in pursuing justice, contribute to the cycle of violence in the world. They add to the list of injustices. If you want to do away with injustice, really do away with it, says Volf, you must want something more than justice. "You must want love."

In May 2017, Taylor Dumpson became the student body president at American University in Washington, DC. She was the first African American woman to be elected president in the university's nearly 150-year history. It was quite an accomplishment. It was also the beginning of a terrible day. On returning from her inauguration, Dumpson was greeted with the news that a masked man had hung nooses strung up with

bananas around the outside of her sorority house. Then things took a turn for the worse. Andrew Anglin, a white supremacist, posted the story about the nooses and the bananas on his website, the Daily Stormer. Full of hate, Anglin decided to pile on. He asked his followers to “unleash a troll storm” on Dumpson. They did.

The steady rain of racist and misogynist posts and tweets and threats was awful. So awful, Dumpson reported, that she eventually curled up on her dorm-room floor in a fetal position. Fortunately, she didn’t stay there. A prelaw student, Dumpson decided to sue the Daily Stormer. She sued the website and its publisher for harassment. She eventually won a \$750,000 verdict against the white supremacist who called for the troll storm.

While the publisher of the Daily Stormer refused to respond to the lawsuit in any way, one of the trolls who participated in the harassment did. The young man, a teenager from the West Coast, reached out to authorities and told them he wanted to repent. Dumpson agreed to meet with him. Friends asked, “Why would you want to do that?” For Dumpson, this was not only an opportunity for restorative justice, but a test of her belief that hearts can change.¹⁵

They met. This young man looked her in the eye and, without cynicism or snark, he apologized. It took, I am sure, tremendous courage for Dumpson to sit down with this fellow who had trolled her mercilessly. It took something else, too. It took love—a love for truth-telling, a love for humanity at its ugliest, a persistent, I’m-going-to-keep-knocking-on-this-door, deep-down love for justice.

This is no easy love, but it has power—power to change hearts, to convert a troll and even an unjust judge. It’s the sort of courageous love that just might remake this messed-up world, if only there were room for it in our hearts.

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