

“The Gospel According to *Sting*”
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 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

On July 10th, NPR’s “All Songs Considered” released a special called the “Tiny Desk Concert,” which featured two musicians performing together: Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner - also known as “Sting,” once the lead singer of the band *The Police* - and reggae star Orville Richard Burrell - also known as “Shaggy.”¹ Sting and Shaggy - an Englishman and a Jamaican. The two have collaborated on projects before - they put out an album together in 2018 and went on tour - and they’re buddies. Shaggy affectionately calls Sting, “Sting-y.” On the day they sat down together at NPR’s Tiny Desk, which looks like a set in a Barnes and Noble store, they played several songs, including Sting’s *Englishman in New York*. That song was first released in February of 1988, and it has a little something for everyone: a reggae beat for reggae fans; a saxophone for jazz fans; strings for classical music fans; Sting’s voice for *Police* fans; it’s light-hearted for pop fans; and it was performed most recently in an NPR studio for...NPR fans. The song’s lyrics tell a story about living in the U.S. but being from a different country - living as an Englishman in New York.

Sitting in NPR’s Tiny Desk studio, Sting played the guitar, Shaggy clapped the beat, and Sting sang these words:

I don’t take coffee, I take tea, my dear / I like my toast done on one side / And you can hear it in my accent when I talk / I’m an Englishman in New York / See me walking down Fifth Avenue / A walking cane here at my side / I take it everywhere I walk / I’m an Englishman in New York

When Shaggy took over the lyrics he changed the words and sang, “I’m a Jamaican in New York,” delighting the small crowd of fans in the NPR studio that day.

But the song is more than just a light-hearted mix of reggae, jazz, pop, and rock. It pulls listeners into the world of otherness; it invites them to consider being an Englishman in New York who drinks tea, eats toast done on one side, carries a cane, and speaks with an accent - someone recognizable by diet, appearance, and speech as “other.” Also “other” when it comes to values. In that song, Sting goes on to speak about his “modesty” and “propriety,” and his gentlemanliness as an Englishman, and he laments that “Gentleness [and] sobriety are rare in [U.S.] society.”

After I watched the Tiny Desk Concert on NPR’s website, I opened my Apple Music music account and binge-listened to *Police* and *Sting* songs, several of which I hadn’t heard in years. If experiencing otherness is a theme in “Englishman in New York,” overcoming otherness is a theme in the 1984 Sting song “Russians.” That song reflects on the nuclear arms race, and the threat to humanity it posed. Here are some lyrics from that song:

In Europe and America there’s a growing feeling of hysteria / Conditioned to respond to all the threats / In the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets / Mister Krushchev said, “We will bury

¹ Watch them perform here: <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/10/739721904/sting-and-shaggy-tiny-desk-concert>

you" / I don't subscribe to this point of view / It'd be such an ignorant thing to do / If the Russians love their children too / How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy? / There is no monopoly on common sense / On either side of the political fence / We share the same biology, regardless of ideology / Believe me when I say to you / I hope the Russians love their children too / ... There's no such thing as a winnable war / It's a lie we don't believe anymore / ... We share the same biology, regardless of ideology / But what might save us, me and you / Is if the Russians love their children too

Sting wrote that song after watching a Russian version of Sesame Street on Russian T.V., and thinking to himself that maybe the Russians *do* love their children too.²

In today's gospel reading from Luke, Jesus both encounters otherness and overcomes it when he's approached by friends of a Roman centurion. The story takes place right after the great Sermon on the Plain as it's known in Luke (in Matthew's gospel it's called the Sermon on the Mount, but the content in both sermons is similar.) In that sermon - perhaps the greatest Jesus ever preached - are moral gems such as the Golden Rule, which we all learned in kindergarten and in Sunday School, and which we heard read to us a moment ago: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." And in that sermon, Jesus challenges listeners then and readers now to love their enemies and do good to those who hate you. He offers guidance about charity: "Give to everyone who begs from you," he says. He warns against hypocrisy: "take the log out of your own eye," he says, "and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." "Do not judge," he says, "and you will not be judged." And then he offers blessings - blessings on the poor and the hungry and on those who mourn. He also warns the rich and the well fed and those with good reputations. Luke the gospel writer uses this teaching as a set-up for today's story - today's story where a rich and well fed Roman Centurion - an officer in the army - who had a good reputation, and who, as a Roman, was considered an "enemy," one to be judged and hated - this Roman Centurion sent friends to Jesus asking for healing for the Centurion's sick servant. As we read this story, the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Plain are still hovering in the background: "Do to others as you would have them do to you"; "love your enemies"; "Give to everyone who begs from you"; "Do not judge." It's as if Luke, the writer, is putting Jesus to the test in today's story: Will Jesus abide by his own teaching? Will he love *this* enemy, do good for him, give to the one who asks? How will he treat this "other"?

Maybe the Centurion's friends sensed how awkward this moment was - a Roman, a representative of the occupying empire, asking a Jewish healer, a carpenter and peasant, a member of the occupied, for aid - maybe they sense how awkward this moment was, one enemy asking another enemy for help, because they don't just pass on the Centurion's request to Jesus. They make a case on his behalf. "[This Centurion] is worthy of having you do this for him," they say to Jesus. "He loves our people [the Jews], and it is he who built our synagogue for us." You know, New Testament gospel writers can sometimes be annoyingly terse. Luke doesn't expound on this Centurion's personal story - all we're told is that he loves the Jews and he financed the building of a synagogue - but there's got to be a rich backstory here. Why would a Roman Centurion offer patronage to Jews? Build them a synagogue - a house of worship. Befriend synagogue leaders and send those leaders to a Jew from Nazareth asking a favor.

² <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/sting/russians>

Today's story is especially odd because ancient Roman literature is filled with anti-Semitism. In his *Satires*, the first century Roman writer Juvenal mocks the Jews for resting on the Sabbath day, calling it "idleness." He mocks them for not eating pork, for practicing circumcision, for, in his words, "worshiping the clouds" instead of images, and for learning all of this in some "secret book" written by Moses.³ The Roman historian, Tacitus, adds his mocking voice when he writes that "the Jews regard as profane all that we [Romans] hold sacred." And he dismisses the Jews as depraved for having what he thinks are weird food practices.⁴ Even the Roman emperor, Gaius Caligula, early in the first century weighed in by mockingly asking a Jewish delegation to Rome, "Why is it that you abstain from eating pork?" A question that made the entire royal court roar with laughter.⁵ The Jews in turn started several wars with Rome - wars of revolution - and they penned apocalyptic texts and sang apocalyptic songs that dreamed of Rome's collapse. Romans and Jews. Enemies.

Yet, in today's story it's a *Roman* Centurion, of all people, asking a *Jew* from Nazareth for help - a Jew from Nazareth who just finished teaching his followers to "Do to others as you would have them do to you." He didn't qualify this statement; he didn't say *do to "some" others*. And this Jewish rabbi from Nazareth had just finished teaching his followers to "love their enemies." He didn't qualify this statement; he didn't say *love "some" enemies*. And this Jew from Nazareth had just finished teaching his followers to "Give to everyone who begs from you." He didn't qualify this statement; he didn't say *give only to "some" who beg from you*. And Jesus had just finished telling his followers "Not to judge." He didn't qualify this statement. He didn't say *do not judge "some," but go ahead and judge others*. And so this Jew from Nazareth - with a heart of compassion, speaking timeless and challenging moral words, words that if lived could change the world - is given the chance in today's story to put his heart of compassion and his moral teaching into action....for a *Roman*, an enemy. Maybe this encounter with the Centurion was - for lack of a better phrase - a *come to Jesus moment*....for Jesus. Like Sting - the Englishman in New York - watching Russian Sesame Street and thinking of Russian children. Maybe the *Romans* love their children too.

It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus and the Centurion never actually meet in this story. Their entire conversation happens through third parties - through third parties who try to make a case to Jesus that *this* Centurion - perhaps unlike *other* Centurions - is "worthy" to have his request for help granted, because he loves the Jews and gave money to build their synagogue. In the ancient world - like today - many building projects were financed with private donations - call them ancient capital campaigns. Archaeologists have discovered dozens of inscriptions in the Mediterranean region, written to honor patrons who gave money to build houses of worship. One inscription on a block of limestone from the first century honors a certain man named Theodotos in Jerusalem for building a synagogue. A woman named Julia Severa is honored on a marble slab from the early second century for building a synagogue in Phrygia. And a woman named Tation is honored in a third century inscription for building a synagogue in Asia Minor - modern day Turkey. I wonder if a marble slab was engraved with the Roman Centurion's name on the synagogue *he* financed. Such gifts from ancient wealthy patrons placed others in their debt; and if the patron asked for a favor in return, it was considered bad form not to grant it. "[This Centurion] is worthy of having you do this for him," said the Centurion's friends to Jesus. "Because he loves the Jews, and he built our synagogue." We can't know what was going through Jesus' mind as they made the ask. But

³ *Satires*, XIV.96-106.

⁴ *Historiae*, 5.4-5.

⁵ Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 361.

my guess is that their words were just white noise for him. I don't think Jesus cared about what the Centurion had done. Jesus represented a God whose grace can't be bought - a God who is concerned with the intentions of the human heart not the external trappings of success; a God who showers grace on all without distinction, whether Roman or Jew, rich or poor. And as with nearly every healing story in the gospels, the point of this story is not the healing itself. The point of this story is the encounter: two *others* - a Jew and a Roman - a Roman who had faith that made even Jesus marvel. It's a story about overcoming otherness - we might call it "the gospel according to *Sting*." And it's a story about living *into* those powerful words from the Sermon on the Plain: "Do to others as you would have them do to you"; "love your enemies"; "Give to everyone who begs from you"; "Do not judge."

This past Wednesday was the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech," which he delivered in Washington DC on August 28, 1963. But there's another notable speech by Dr. King delivered just two months before his untimely death in 1968 - it's a sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.⁶ In that sermon, Dr. King speaks cryptically about how he wants to be eulogized, and his words remind me of the life and teaching of Jesus. Here's part of what Dr. King said:

"Every now and then I guess we all think realistically about that day when we will be victimized with what is life's final common denominator - that something that we call death. We all think about it. And every now and then I think about my own death and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. And every now and then I ask myself, 'What is it that I would want said?' ... I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize - that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards - that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. ... [A]ll of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say."

Amen.

⁶ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church>