

February 24, 2019
7 Epiphany, Year C
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Love Your Enemy: Why and How

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing -- begins the collect for the day.

Having just finished the series of blessings and woes in what we know as the Beatitudes, Jesus keeps on teaching and proclaiming. He continues with some hard sayings.

Love your enemies. Love those who may never love you in return. And just so we know what kind of love we are talking about, we are talking about the unconditional kind of love that is "all-in" and without reservation. It is the parental kind of love that welcomes back a wayward lost prodigal son and calls for a celebration. It is the Samaritan kind of love crossing the road to help a stranger in need. It is about doing good, blessing, praising, lifting up and praying for the other. (David Ewart, www.holytextures.com) It is, we may agree, the hardest kind of love. And so we begin.

²⁷"But I say to you that listen – Jesus says -- love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27-38

When I hear these words, part of me wants to ask Jesus: why? Why do we have to show love for those who show nothing in kind to us? And perhaps, a better question: how? How in the world to I – we -- express love for those coming at us with disregard and disdain?

I want to rationalize the words -- wiggle out of them by dismissing them as only aspirational. A series of goals for us to attain one day. Love your enemies – who are we kidding? Really? Love the dictator? The horrible boss? The abuser? The drive-by shooter? How does this make any sense?

We can dismiss the words as "Jesus words." Something the Son of God could pull off or some of the great saints of the church. How in the world could you and I rise to that level of love?

And, we can wonder: what if these words were never spoken or heard? What then?

Switch around and replace the words: Hate your enemies. Hate those who hate you. Curse those who curse you. Abuse those who abuse you. What would our world look like then?

Consider how we might respond to the energy and force coming towards us. When and if we feel that we are being blamed, tormented, libeled, bullied and abused, how might we get

out of the impulse and the default reaction to do just the same to the other. How do we not meet fire with fire? Or take an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.

Remember: without love, whatever we do is worth nothing. God is love. Jesus said: love one another as I have loved you.

God so loved the world that God gave us Jesus to show us the depth of that love, then everything we believe in, from the meaning of the universe, from the purpose of our lives, to the reason we get up in the morning is about love. Quite simply, when we say to yes to this life of Christian faith, more is expected of us.

Think about how we react to people and events in our daily lives.

Through the course of our schooling we may have heard: 'Every Action has an Equal and Opposite Reaction.' This is the third of Sir Isaac Newton's laws of physics. If you push on something, it pushes back against you. So, if you lean against the wall, the wall pushes back on you as hard as you push. Actions create reactions. How does this law of physics stand up to God's law and the core of the teaching of Jesus?

When air around us gets heavy, life gets dark, and the people and climate around us grow more and more negative and toxic, these teachings this morning remind us to take a moment, step back, and reorient ourselves about who we are and what we believe in, or we may very well assume the behavior of those coming at us.

I have seen this in my own life. People's behaviors have at times become triggers for me. I find it far too easy to go down the rabbit hole with them. To greet negativity with the same. To go toe-to-toe with the gossip, the assumptions, the passive aggression. Instead of thinking and acting the way I would like – the honoring and blessing kinds of living – it is so easy and human to push back and fight back. To double down and meet fire with fire.

To what end -- it is ever worth it? One can get locked in a battle of wills that leads only downward and is far removed for the call Christ is making each one of us to turn and claim the new life of grace and blessing that is ours for the taking.

Loving your enemies and those who curse you – Jesus is not asking any of to get walked over – we are not meant to be door mats for Jesus. We can look to John 5 when Jesus heals the man who had been sick for 38 years and lived his life waiting for passersbys to put him in a healing pool of water. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?" Then Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man got well; he picked up his mat and started walking. Then the religious rule keepers confronted him, the way he described Jesus goes right to the point: He answered them: "The man who made me well told me to pick up my mat and walk."

We are called to walk in a different way. A better way. A God-centered way. And I do believe this is a key challenge today. If we believe there is a heightened climate of hatred and mistrust, a demonizing of the other, in our culture today, then how and when

does it ever stop. Someone somehow has to say: no more. I'm not biting at this opportunity. Enough.

Luke includes the Golden Rule. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. This rule is not exclusively the domain of Christians, for it was widely circulated in the ancient world. It speaks of balance and fairness. It is a simple teaching that we should all know and take to heart and practice in our daily lives as much as we can. If we expect kindness, be kind. If we don't want to be judged for who we are or the mistakes we have made, don't do it ourselves.

I offer one way to believe in the capacity for the world to change and to draw closer to what God desires. From the quiet of your homes, in your barber chair, out for lunch with friends, in the break room at work, or in the lunch room at school, or on your knees at church: question why the death penalty has not been repelled in the State of New Hampshire. It is the question directly related to today's gospel.

It takes a lot to get Protestants, Anglicans, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians together on the same page about a matter of public policy. Yet churches from all of these traditions have joined together to call for the repeal of the death penalty – rarely used but still on the books in New Hampshire.

Our bishop, Rob Hirschfield testified to a house committee last week saying: "The Death Penalty is morally repugnant because it makes us all complicit in homicide. The Death Penalty is ineffective as a deterrent to capital crimes. When we put to death, even criminals who have committed heinous and contemptible acts, we do little but show how evil has succeeded in ensnaring us and in drawing us deeper into pernicious web of increasing malice, hatred and violence."

The New Hampshire Council of Churches reminds us in their statements that Scripture cautions us: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" (Romans 12:17). The death penalty perpetuates inhumane retribution and fosters feelings of revenge. The use of capital punishment does not restore a broken society; it perpetuates the violence and injustice instead of condemning such intolerable acts.

Love your enemy. If we are ready to go there, we realize that it's not just about the other or the perceived enemy. Or the haters. Forgiving and not judging is about us and our relationship with God. A God who is known through love. And without love whatever we do is worth nothing.