

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 24, 2019

“Love Your Enemy? Are You Kidding, Lord?”

Luke 6:27-38

Love your enemy? These days? Possible perhaps, but not likely. In fact, we would prefer not to. Especially when we believe we're right and our neighbor is wrong. Especially when we're hurt and don't seem to get over it. Especially when others are not of the same mind as we are. It is hard to find anything resembling love in our hearts these days.

But now we pick up our Bibles and are confronted by the words of Jesus: “But I tell you who hear me. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). Nuts! Truth is, we would rather have permission to bomb the enemy back to the Stone Age, or at least some punishment that would fit the crime, not this. Love your enemies? What does Jesus mean?

It should be noted that, both in Jesus' time and in our own, there are some folks who seem to think that it is almost a sacred duty to hate anyone who is not “one of us,” just watch the Republicans and Democrats in our country right now, forget this love stuff. The Essenes of the Qumran community, the people who preserved the Dead Sea scrolls, were like that. They believed that they were to “love all the children of light and hate all the children of darkness.” This reference in Luke's gospel is not the only place we find this instruction in the New Testament, it is also in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 where Jesus reported to have said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). Whether Jesus was thinking of the Essenes when he brought this subject up, we have no way of knowing. But the point is, that people, religious or not, do think and act in terms of hatred for their enemies, and Jesus says, “This should not be.”

All right, we can go along with that. Do not hate the guy down the street who kicked your dog, the teenager in the back of your house who is driving you nuts, or any other enemy. That's good advice. After all, everyone knows that hating anyone does more harm to the one doing the hating than the one who is the object of hate. It would be fine if that is what Jesus said...but, of course, it is not. He did not say, “Do not hate your enemy,” he said, “Love your enemy,” and there is a world of difference.

What could Jesus possibly have meant? Not romantic love, but agape love—the kind of caring and concern we would have for someone whose welfare was really important to us. An unfailing goodwill that will exist no matter what, even in the midst of conflict. Does that mean that we are to condone evil? Does loving our enemies mean that we can never confront them about what made us enemies in the first place? Of course not. We are certainly not very loving, we are not looking out for someone's highest and best good, if we let them get away with anything they please, if we do not set limits. In terms of our enemies or potential enemies they, too, will end up in a better relationship with us once they understand just what limits are. Love, even for enemies, will define the limits.

All right, we are to love our enemies. Our love is not the kind that will just allow anything to go on but will seek the highest and best for them. You must admit, that is a tall order. How are we to go about it? Jesus gives a hint: pray for them. To be sure, that is not our natural inclination. If there is someone we really dislike, someone we really hate, we surely are not going to pray for them. As a matter of fact, if their name ever comes up in our prayers, it is generally in terms of some kind of violent death, or at least painful injury. But Jesus does not say “pray about them,” he says, “pray for them” (Luke 6:28). It works. You just cannot hate someone for whom you are praying.

How does God treat enemies? Pretty strangely according to the way most of us would think. We know very well that there are people in this world who scoff at God and God's commands; they have no feelings of guilt or moral scruple about the most heinous sin; they would never consider darkening the door of a church. But what happens to them? Not much that we can see. We think of some arch-criminals and they seem to get along okay, more than okay, big cars, fine homes, lots of money, and we wonder why. We think it is not fair. But apparently God does not worry much about temporary things. God's blessings are available to all alike, at least in this life. To be sure, there will come a day of judgment. But that is not our worry. What Jesus is telling us is that, as far as this world is concerned, our treatment of other people, even enemies, is to be based on seeking the highest and best for them, agape love, just exactly the way God does.

The Lord makes another point here. If we do not act that way, what makes us any different from anyone else? If you only love the people who love you back, big deal. Jesus says that even the dregs of society are willing to respond with love for love. God's people need to be ready with more than that, even to the extent of responding with love for hate. If we cannot manage more than love for love, what makes us different from the lowest of the low? Nothing at all...nothing at all.

Then there is the question of being civil. He says if the only people to whom we are willing to say, "Hello," if the only ones to whom we are willing to extend the niceties of life, are those in our own crowd, how are we different from even the pagans? The message is that God's people are to reach beyond just those in their own crowd, and even to those whom they might think of as enemies, in extending the common courtesies. We cannot be content to act like everyone else in the world, even in the matter of who gets a greeting from us and who does not. God's people are to be different.

Love your enemies? Are you kidding, Lord? No. Jesus says. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27-28). As William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, said, "The only way a Christian has of getting rid of his enemies is to love them into being his friends." There are days when that seems impossible, ill-timed, and unrealistic. But, you know, it just might work. On top of that, this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.