

Reflection for Sunday, February 20, 2022

“I Shall Not Hate”

Each part of creation reveals unique aspects of God the Creator, who is both in creation and beyond it. All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are related. All creation is good. We sing of the Creator, who made humans to live and move and have their being in God. In and with God, we can direct our lives toward right relationship with each other and with God. We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life. We can grow in wisdom and compassion. We can recognize all people as kin. We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse, but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter. Made in the image of God, we yearn for the fulfillment that is life in God. Yet we choose to turn away from God. We surrender ourselves to sin, a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy. Becoming bound and complacent in a web of false desires and wrong choices, we bring harm to ourselves and others. This brokenness in human life and community is an outcome of sin. Sin is not only personal but accumulates to become habitual and systemic forms of injustice, violence, and hatred. We are all touched by this brokenness... (Song of Faith).

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28).

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you that your love comes first, so that we don't have to create a world, but have a world in which we can respond to your love. Keep us from being placid or uncaring as beneficiaries of your love.

Help us to keep rejoicing that you thought us important enough to share your life with us, in order to give us fresh ways to share that gift from you, so that it can also become a gift to others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This Sunday's Gospel continues Luke's version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, with teachings requiring unconditional, unlimited love and the prohibition of retaliation. The love that discipleship in the kingdom of God requires, that is consistent in the behaviour of Jesus' earthly pilgrimage, extends to all persons, regardless of merit or deservedness. The love of the disciple, like the love of God, goes out even to the enemy: those who do us wrong, those who curse us, and those who do us damage.

Jesus is teaching agape, a love that is so deep and forgiving that it breaks through normal barriers and becomes open-hearted and radically generous in its operation. This unlimited love does not come from a moral "should" but from an infused vision, a holy, enlightened view of all people that only God can give. This love is to be expressed even when there is no loving response! This kind of love longs for the well-being of the beloved. It is love directed or willed by the nature of the lover, which means it can remain strong even when the beloved turns away. This giving and forgiving love always desires goodness for the beloved; this is the kind of love God gives to us, and therefore we ought to have for one another. It is love toward those who don't really deserve it but are given it anyhow, whether it is returned or not; love toward those who may not realize that they are already the beneficiaries of God's love; love that takes the initiative.

Whatever else the cross may mean, it means at least that; that even when love is crucified, the crucified one keeps on loving, refusing to return spite for spite. When they pound nails into his flesh and leave

him to die, his response is, “Forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” That is the way God deals with our spite, our hatred, our rejection—simply by continuing to love us against all odds.

Don’t ever call Christian love sentimental. It may appear unrealistic, or foolhardy, or too demeaning, or too costly, but sentimental it is not. It is, quite literally, hard as nails. This life is not easy; it asks a lot. It requires us to abandon the cycle of violence and retribution, rejecting at last the self-defeating logic of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” It calls us to expand the circle of our concern beyond the narrow boundaries of group or tribe.

In directing us to give even the shirt off our back, it demands a radical dependence on the God who has promised to provide for us. Most of all, it asks us to sacrifice our long-cherished sense of aggrievement toward our enemies, rendering them in the process not enemies at all, but fellow sinners forgiven by God. James Robinson writes: “By using the ‘kingdom of God,’ Jesus put his ideal for society in an antithetical relation both to the other political and social systems and to individual self-interest (‘looking out for number one’). The human dilemma is, in large part, that we are each other’s fate. We become the tool of evil that ruins another person as we look out for ourselves, having long abandoned any youthful idealism we might once have cherished. But if we each would cease and desist from pushing the other down to keep ourselves up, then the vicious cycle would be broken. Society would become mutually supportive rather than self-destructive. Jesus’ message was simple, for he wanted to cut straight to the point: trust God to look out for you by providing people who will care for you, and listen to God when God calls on you to provide for them.”

“Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.” Can you and I come close to fulfilling this expectation? If we want it to be more than

just a well-known teaching, then we must ask God to help us with its precepts, to take some steps in its direction. We do this by asking: who are my present enemies? We can begin this process by praying for them. It's hard to hate anyone for whom we pray.

As coworkers in Christ's mission, we are called to imitate Jesus' radical, all-encompassing love. We don't always succeed. All of us fall short. But when we take some steps, we are on our way to coming very close to the very heart of God.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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