

Can We Really Love Our Enemies

Luke 6:27-36

The gospel lesson this morning is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. It is plain talk -- tough talk -- hard to listen to talk. We come today to Jesus most difficult teaching. Here is what sets apart the Christian faith from other religious perspectives, philosophic constructs, psychological systems and elemental common sense. And yet, at the end of the day, it defines the core of Christian ethics.

"Love your enemies," Jesus says. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Can we really love our enemies? If not, why did Jesus lay on us this impossible demand? If the teaching troubles you, fear not, you are not the first to back away from this bit of divine fire. Christians have always had a rough time figuring out, or crawling out from under, the Lord's categorical demand that we love our enemies.

A hundred years ago the great Christian, Albert Schweitzer, held that Jesus, or the early church which actually recorded the teaching, never intended that we could live like that -- at least not for long. Schweitzer held that the early church believed Jesus was going to return to earth very soon -- in a few years at most, and that the command to love one's enemies was a temporary edict; what was called an interim ethic. It was like holding your breath. You can do it for a while. But Jesus did not immediately return, and the church was stuck with an ethical command no one can live up to.

Paul, who had probably heard about the saying even though he wrote before the gospels were completed, puts an interesting twist on it. Quoting from the often less than inspiring book of Proverbs, he says, "If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him drink, for by so doing you heap burning coals upon his head." Loving your enemy, it turns out, is just another way to do him in. I doubt if that is what Jesus had in mind.

We can kick and squirm and reinterpret the Lord's words, but when all is said and done, we must conclude that Jesus meant what he said. We are to love those who despise us and bless those who curse us. Indeed, it is at this point the Christian ethic is most vividly etched out in a violent, pagan, brutal world filled with hate and bitterness; a world just like ours.

"That's very radical," but that's what makes it Christian. We are not certain we want religion to be that radical. We would rather it be more socially acceptable, comfortable and in line with the way we ordinarily do things. We want a nice, safe, domesticated religion, and loving one's enemies is not it. Nor is it the way of the world. Not by a long shot. When your enemy is down you stomp on them. If you are hit on one cheek you make sure you hit back twice as hard. If he has one gun you get two. If she has a big bomb, you get a bigger one a dozen bigger ones. That's the way of the world.

Christians, of course, did not invent love, nor do we have a monopoly on it. I don't know of any culture or system which denies the rightness of love. The difference comes in defining whom you love. The world says, "Love those who love you." So we come here to church and we love one another. Nothing is wrong with that. But one doesn't need to hold the Christian faith, or any faith for that matter, to love those who love them. As Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same." Matthew's version has Jesus say, "They have their reward". The phrase is derived from a Greek term stamped on bills. "Mark his receipt 'paid in full.'" Loving those who love you is no more than a mutually satisfactory commercial transaction.

But if we take this text seriously, we are confronted with much more than a commercial transaction; something beyond the way of the world, something beyond the ethic of mutual satisfaction. We have a whole new, radical, difficult -- perhaps impossible -- ethic.

Jesus nowhere implies that Christians won't have enemies. While I like to think Christians can get along with everybody, I remember Jesus said, "Beware when all speak well of you." If I never do or say anything that is going to disturb bigots, racists, those who trust in violence, those who live off injustice, the insensitive, the crude and rude, I may never have an enemy. But neither will I have been faithful to the gospel. Christians will have enemies all right. What they need to be certain of is that they have the right enemies.

I am not afraid of being controversial -- history is God's controversy with faithlessness. If Christianity implies being so neutral about everything that you never have an enemy to contend with, Jesus wasn't much of a Christian. While there is no virtue in going around making enemies, and while Christians should try and get along with everyone, if we are faithful there will be those who try to silence us.

How are we supposed to love our enemies? If I cannot feel differently, perhaps I can act differently, and the difference in how I act is the only way I will be able to change my mind. "Bless those who curse you," says Jesus. "Pray for those who abuse you ... To a person who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other ... And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them." The secret is in the doing. I may not be able to control my feelings, nor can I pretend to feel differently than I do. But I can control my actions. As I have told people in counseling: It is often easier to act your way into a new set of feelings, than it is to feel your way into a new set of actions.

If I am on the outs with someone and I wait until my opinion, my mood or my feelings change, chances are I will wait forever. The only hope of breaking the logjam is if one of us, namely me, changes how I act. I may not be able to change my attitude unless I first change my behavior. That may be the only hope I have of turning my enemy into a friend.

We will never resolve international issues by throwing an army at someone or threatening them with a bomb. That may temporarily keep the peace, but it won't solve the problem. But when we learn to treat our enemies differently, there is hope. Right now, the leadership of the United States is deporting immigrants, placing tariffs on our allies to strong arm them into submission, bullying nations to take their territory and taking actions against our transgender brother and sisters and the marginalized. If we are really the Christian nation we claim to be, why aren't we caring for the immigrants, working with our allies to come to an agreement that works for everyone, and loving and caring for our Transgender brothers and sisters and the marginalized? As James said to the early church, "Let us not love in word and speech, but in deed and truth."

Whoever said, "If you want peace, prepare for war," hadn't come within a million miles of the Christian ethic, which says, "If you want peace prepare for peace." In the world you deal with enemies by throttling them. In the kingdom of God -- and we have been called to be a kingdom people -- you deal with enemies by loving them. That is our goal.

The sayings of Jesus in this Sermon on the Plain are not a diagram of how things work in the world, but a picture of how things work in God's kingdom. That is what Jesus came to bring, and that is what the church is to show the world. There is another way to order life, a way the world does not understand. We are the advance party of God's kingdom. We, the church, have been assigned the task of etching out a beachhead for the kingdom on the inhospitable shores of a world now ruled by the ethic of revenge and violence.

We are God's emissaries; we live as if the kingdom has already come. For in us, by the grace of God, it is now in our midst however imperfectly. We live and work by faith, giving ourselves in service to the one whose kingdom is both in our midst and on the way. For the coming of that kingdom we pray, waiting for that day when it is as real on earth as it is in heaven.

Can we really love our enemies? By the rules of the world, probably not. But by the grace of God, we can -- and must.