

“Living the Faith: Extravagant Love”

Luke 6:27-36

May 5, 2019

Have you ever come across a bit of wisdom, a quote, a poem, or a song, that seems to hit you right in the heart? Then after having engaged it, you find yourself simultaneously acknowledging the beauty of its truth and wishing you had somehow never been bothered by it in the first place. Because of it, you now sense a call to change, a call to see the world in a new way, a call to be different than you were before you saw it, read it, or heard it. And now there is no way to un-hear it.

It lives inside you.

At moments like these, a decision has to be made. You face the challenge to either ignore its truth, to try your best to forget it ever existed, or to integrate it into who you are while allowing it to influence the who you are becoming.

That is precisely how I feel about today’s Gospel text. I simply wish it wasn’t there. If I am honest with myself and with you this morning, I wish that the author of the Gospel of Luke had never recalled these words of Jesus. I think this is the most difficult text in all of the Gospels, and I really struggle with its truth. I can’t un-hear it.

This text is found in what is often called the Sermon on the Plain. Here the first-century readers, and us by extension, are confronted with a collection of Jesus’ sayings similar to and in some ways identical with what we find in what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew’s Gospel. In Luke’s retelling, Jesus speaks a series of blessings and woes to those gathered on what the author says is a level place. We are told by the author that Jesus then speaks these words we just read together this morning.

Jesus says, “I say to you that listen, Love your enemies”.

This morning, I ask you the question that has been haunting me for several weeks, what are we to do with this?

These words from the lips of Jesus don’t fit in our world

that is full of division and enmity; a world that has always been full of division and enmity. These words don’t fit with our social media platforms that are constantly full of venom and vitriol or in our incessant 24-hour news cycle full of fear where we are constantly being told who we are supposed to hate. It seems as though there is a new enemy every day and someone else we are supposed to despise waiting around every corner.

I must confess that I have personally grown weary of the constant messages telling me who my enemies are. I am tired of sectarian tribalism, and of hateful and hate-filled speech. I am worn out by the false binaries set before us; the either or, the us vs. them; the me vs. the world.

In such a world, what are we to do with Jesus’ words?

Just as we ask this question, those who are listening can hear the words again, as if for the first time. As we tune our ears and our hearts to hear, we may be able to begin to understand that this disruptive passage from Luke is calling us away from the way of the world. The way that encourages all to return to the other that which we are given; an eye for an eye, insult for insult, injury for injury, hurt with more hurt. In Jesus’ words, we hear a different call. We hear a call to treat the other in our midst and beyond in the manner in which we long to be treated. Here in Luke’s Gospel, this Golden Rule is not some stand-alone abstraction for the author. No, it is tied directly to our love of the enemy and to the mercy of the divine. There is no separation. The love of God, the divine mercy offered and received, should be evidenced in the lives of those who claim to follow in the way of Jesus, and it should overflow into the world.

A question may still remain, what if the enemy we see is not out there somewhere?

What if the enemy that is most destructive dwells within our very self?

All of this love, all of love itself, is tied to the one who is love. Our lives, our discipleship, are not an attempt to earn this love, to obtain God's mercy, to gain divine grace. Love that exists, all love, flows from and back into the God who is the author of love, the God who is love. Therefore, we have no reason to fear even our very selves, for we all were created out of, made for, and remain within love.

John O'Donahue, Irish poet, philosopher, author, and priest, wrote, "In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of social acquaintance fall away, you can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of the other person's soul... This art of love discloses the special and sacred identity of the other person. Love is the only light that can truly read the secret signature of the other person's individuality and soul."ⁱ

This love is the way of life. Perhaps this is precisely why we need to hear these difficult words the most, why these words are still important. For perhaps without this call to love those who we see as our enemies, there can be no love at all. Perhaps if we remove this truth from the faith we pursue, we lose that very faith. As theologian Miroslav Volf said, "Take away the love of enemy from the Christian faith and you unchristian the Christian faith."ⁱⁱ We are called to be different because we follow the one who not only told us to love our enemies, no matter who they are, but also showed us the way to love.

This truth, this call seems to be at the center of the living out of what it is that we say we believe. This is a call away from isolation and tribal response. This is a call toward the divine in each one of us. This is a call beyond our petty divisions, our all too simplistic categories of separation, our beloved animosities, our destructive grudges; it is a call into the most uncomfortable of places. This is a call into the action of love.

A daughter of this congregation who grew up attending VBS, Sunday school, youth service trips and retreats; who was confirmed on these steps; who was the kind of

young person present every time the doors were open no matter what was going on; who recently made the challenging trek to Palestine and Israel with a group of 17 of her peers now works as a teacher as a part of Teach for America following her college years. The school in which she works is a school that faces challenges beyond most of our imaginings. Throughout the time that she has been teaching, she has worked hard to grow closer to the young people in her classes, understand their perspectives, teach them about more than just the subject matter, and act as a voice of justice on their behalf. She has walked alongside them through many academic and life challenges. Recently she faced an unimaginable tragedy in her classroom. One of her students' brothers died. He was yet another tragic victim of senseless gun violence on the streets of our cities. The day the student returned to school and into her classroom, she wrote this on her Facebook page,

"Today, a student who has been out of school since his brother was shot and killed last weekend came to class for the first time since his loss. I have never seen so much pain on the face of a child. It's important to note that this is a gross reminder of my privilege.

This particular student has challenged me this year. He's intelligent and funny, which makes him a first year teacher's nightmare when he's cracking jokes in a class I can barely manage. He plays basketball for the school team, and loves it so much that when his mom threatened to take it away from him if he didn't shape up in my class, he changed his behavior overnight. He's incredibly quick-witted, and as our relationship has grown he's had me dying laughing as if I'm a student even though I know I'm supposed to be the adult in the room. I know he's going places.

It's wrong to make any of his pain about me, and that's not what I'm trying to do here. But our world is so full of violence that I think I've forgotten that every victim has a life, friends, and a family that are all left behind. They have little sisters and little brothers who idolize them. My student said today that he wants to rap and play basketball just like his big brother did. And that he knows that the most important thing right now is to take care of his mom.

She continued, “Seeing my student who I love and care about be in so much pain has reminded me that violence carves out a path through the lives of everyone who the victim loved, creating a ripple effect of trauma and pain.”

The next morning, she and I had a text conversation. She expressed her grief, and her struggle with the systemic oppression and violence in our world that she now sees with new eyes every day. As we were chatting the Belhar Confession, a confession of the church that was written during apartheid in South Africa and was recently added to our own book of confessions, became a conversation partner for us. After reading it, she said, “I love that confession. It tells us exactly what we should be doing. I’ve been thinking a lot since our trip to Palestine about who Jesus would be with if he were here. And I know now that he’d be more likely to spend time with the person who shot my student’s brother than he would to spend time with me.”

And then she wrote, “And that’s why I follow him.”

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the Good News enfleshed.

The Jesus, who forgave his enemies as he died on a cross as a victim of empirical violence, shows us the way to love.

He shows us the way of love; the cruciform way; the way of love that includes even those we perceive to be our enemies.

This is the extravagant love of a God who would rather face the violence of those who see this kind of love as a threat than to allow hatred to win.

This is the extravagant love of a God who loves beyond false binaries, and either ors.

This is the extravagant love of a God who calls those of us who are listening to extend the same mercy to others that has been extended to us.

This is the extravagant love of a God who calls us beyond a set of beliefs and toward a life characterized by love for our enemies; a love that disarms and overturns systems that perpetuate violence.

Once we have experienced this love perhaps there are no more enemies.

And that is why we should all follow Jesus into this kind of love.

This love is the level place.

This isn’t easy. The way of Jesus seldom is. As Christy Herris, a member of Second recently said, “Love: the easiest and hardest thing I’ve ever felt, offered, done, shared, or accepted.”

That is why being a community of deep faith, the love your enemies kind of faith, requires all of us. Because it is hard.

But we must do it. It is our hope. It is our calling.

Heaven knows we need it.

Heaven knows the world needs it.

Amen.

ⁱ ODonohue, John (2004). *Anam cara*: A book of Celtic wisdom. New York: Harper Perennial.

ⁱⁱ Volf, Miroslav, March 17, 2018. *How to Love Your Enemies*. Veritas. www.veritas.org/how-to-love-your-enemies