

Sermon 20.02.09

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18

The LORD spoke to Moses saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

Matthew 5:43-48

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect/whole, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect/whole.

SERMON

We are coming back to a familiar scripture today - part of chapter 5 in Matthew's gospel. This chapter is far and away the scripture most chosen in our 12 Scriptures project - it received almost twice as many votes as any other scripture. We claim it as the most important scripture we turn to for guidance and comfort.

The idea for this particular sermon came out of a discussion that Tim Derstine, Paul McCormick and I had after the Sunday School hour discussion on Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday, where stories of persecution and what that looks like in the nitty gritty of our everyday lives shows up.

And so here we return to this challenging and beautiful call to action, another piece of fruit - a pear - on our tree illustrating the life giving connection - from roots to fruits, of how scripture shapes us, encourages us and calls us to live into the kingdom of God which is near at hand. Let's take another look at one aspect of these challenging words, what I am seeing as a call to the transforming power of love.

I begin with a story -

Back in 1862, with his cabinet of war in disarray following the dismissal of Simon Cameron, President Lincoln named Edwin Stanton to be his secretary of war. Many of his closest advisors were mystified by this choice. "Mr. Lincoln, are you a fool? Do you know what Mr. Stanton has been saying about you? Do you know what he has done, tried to do to you? Do you know that he has tried to defeat you on every hand? Do you know that, Mr. Lincoln? Did you read all of those derogatory statements that he made about you?" Abraham Lincoln stood before the advisors around him and said: "Oh yes, I know about it; I read about it; I've heard him myself" (Mr. Lincoln had worked on a law case with Mr. Stanton years before and been poorly treated by him.) But after looking over the country, Lincoln said, I find that he is the best man for the job." Before his

appointment, Stanton was an outspoken critic, often referring to the president as an imbecile. Yet this is the man Lincoln chose to be one of his closest advisors during the Civil War. Lincoln specifically chose him, and during the 3 ½ years they worked together, Stanton became not only one of his most trusted advisors, but reportedly one of his closest confidants and friends. They shared much in common - both experienced the deaths of their sons and had other griefs and losses that were painfully familiar to the other. They became much more than working partners. Through his willingness to see Stanton's gifts and trust in his humanity, Lincoln transformed the persecutor into a trusted friend.¹

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.' Children...children of the creator of All.

Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery, Alabama, in November 1957, on this passage from Matthew's gospel. It's a text he returned to at least once a year, finding it worthy of diving into again and again, gleaning new insights each time. In that sermon, which is worth listening to in its entirety, he speaks of both the "how" and the "why" of loving our enemies; loving those who persecute you.

Dr King found it worth coming back and revisiting Jesus' declaration that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because this wasn't hyperbole - this wasn't something pie-in-the-sky talk, but *the necessary work of our time*. King believed that loving our enemies is the work of transformation.

And it starts, he says, by looking at ourselves. We must recognize that we hold both good and evil in our hearts. Every single one of us. When Jesus asks "How is it that you see the splinter in your brother's eye and fail to see the plank in your own eye?" It is

¹ <http://www.mrlincolnandfriends.org/the-cabinet/edwin-stanton/>

here that we begin to love our enemies and love those persons that hate us - by looking at ourselves.

We're split up and divided against ourselves, says King, with something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. He talks of a rebellious South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul. And there is this continual struggle within the very structure of every individual life. There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Apostle Paul, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do" (Romans 7:19)

So somehow, within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, some good. When we come to see this, we're able to take a different attitude toward others. King went on: The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every person and see deep down within him what religion calls "the image of God," you begin to love him in spite of the bad. No matter what he does, you see God's image there. There is an element of goodness that can never be sloughed off. Discover the element of good in your enemy, King declares. And as you seek to hate him, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude.

King preached this sermon to his home congregation in 1957, in the midst of real persecution and hate.

That's the *how* we are to love our enemies and those who persecute us, and it touches on the *why*, the why we strive to live in this way -

Why does Jesus say, "Love your enemies."? Because love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That's why Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will

discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. He says, you just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they're mistreating you.

That's it. King reminds us there is a power in love that our world has not yet discovered - one Jesus discovered centuries ago... but most men and most women never discover it. For they believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; they believe in hating for hating; but Jesus comes to us and says, "This isn't the way."

King ends his sermon with these words that sound as true and relevant today as they did more than 60 years ago. I quote: "And oh this morning, as I think of the fact that our world is in transition now; our whole world is facing a revolution. Our nation is facing a revolution. One of the things that concerns me most is that in the midst of the revolution of the world and the midst of the revolution of this nation, that we will discover the meaning of Jesus' words."² (end quote)

Here, in 2020, we return to this call to transforming each other, one relationship at a time, through the act of loving one another. Jesus' words matter today. King points to the individual acts, the minute ways we are called to live out this commandment of Jesus. Love the person in front of you, at this moment, whether it's a family member with whom you vehemently disagree, a co-worker who turns away and boxes you out, or someone you're watching on the news and feeling hate towards in your heart. See that person, in that moment, as one who has the spark of our Creator God within them, just as you have that life giving, loving image of God written within you. Turn towards them, love them, and you are joining Christ in the transformative work of love. Seed by seed, interaction by interaction we do the work of transforming hate into love.

I want to end with another story. A story of a moment of hate being transformed into understanding and seeing one another as persons worthy of love and respect.

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<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-2> or to listen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=522wcqUIS0Y>

Days after the 2016 election, Joseph Weidknecht, a Trump supporter carrying a sign that read “Proud to Be Deplorable”, wearing a “Make America Great Again” cap showed up at a march protesting the election of Donald Trump in Austin, Texas. Amina Amdeen, a Muslim student at the University of Texas, was one of the marchers who came to the peaceful rally that day.

Amina noticed the guy with the hat and that he was surrounded by some people who were being kind of threatening. It was in that moment that Joseph heard the click of a lighter right behind his ear, realizing that 3 people were trying to light his shirt on fire. And then somebody snatched the MAGA hat off his head.

“That’s the point where something kind of snapped inside of me,” said Amina, because I wear a Muslim hijab and I’ve been in situations where people have tried to snatch it off my head. And I rushed towards him and I just started screaming “Leave him alone! Give me that back!”

Out of that experience Joseph and Amina have learned something about each other's lives. They’ve taken the time to hear about each other's childhood, about what little everyday things matter to them. They’ve come to see each other as people.

Though he doesn’t use the word transformation, Joseph says he was changed by that interaction with Amina. He ended his conversation with her saying : I hope I can be the reason that someone decides to talk to someone, as opposed to just cutting them out of their life, or blocking them on Twitter, you know?³

Baby steps. Getting close, reaching out. Transforming moments sometimes require a silent change of heart, when we notice feelings of hate welling up inside us; sometimes being a part of the work of transformation requires that we get our hands dirty. Amina

³ <https://storycorps.org/stories/a-trump-supporter-finds-a-surprising-ally-at-an-anti-trump-rally/>

took a risk that day. She didn't know what Joseph's reaction would be, but she saw an injustice towards another individual, and she reacted - with love.

What does Jesus command to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you look like in your life? One encounter, one interaction at a time. Jesus didn't speak these words as wishful thinking, he proclaimed them as a way to bring the Kingdom of God here, now.

It takes a willingness to see that we, too, carry evil within us. It takes courage to act - whether it's an interior shift in our thoughts and heart, or a turning towards one who is treating you wrongly. Don't misunderstand me - wisdom is needed, we are not to be door mats for abuse, but we are called to love, not to like, but to love and pray for the enemy, the persecutor. May God grant us the courage to plant the seeds of transformation, seeds of transforming love, in the world around us.