



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 7

#### Love Your Enemies

[RCL] Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50; Luke 6:27-38

Across from the airport on North Eleuthera is a small liquor store. On the side of that building are the words we hear from Jesus in the sixth chapter of Luke with two wonderful additions: “Love Your Enemies,” and “It will drive them crazy,” and “And cold beer!” Maybe that’s what Jesus imagines as he ponders the divisions and polarization that surrounds him, and all of Israel, on all sides: Sadducees, Pharisees, Temple priests, and Essenes all each insisting that only they know the way to be a faithful Jew, and that only they knew how to rid the region of the intense military and economic control of Caesar’s Rome. This Caesar, who fancied himself a god. Try to imagine, Jesus seems to be saying, all of the infighting parties sitting down together with Herod and Pilate to enjoy a beverage of their choosing, and all of them working out their differences and moving on to possibly embrace his vision of the kingdom of God, his Father. A kingdom in which people really truly love their neighbors and love one another! Just try to imagine that!

Love your enemies, be good to those who hate you he says. In the Biblical traditions he embraces with his whole heart, mind, and soul, this meant something more like, “When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you struggling under its burden... you must help to set it free” (Exodus 23:4-5). Or perhaps this, from Proverbs: “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink” (Proverbs 25:21).

Love in the Bible does not mean a romantic attraction. In fact, there may be no attraction at all. To love your neighbor, as stipulated in Leviticus 19, is to do something helpful (or even merciful) for your neighbor. And not just your neighbor, but also for the alien, the sojourner, the foreigner who is passing through or living in the land. That person is also to receive the same sort of love and mercy one would show to “the native-born among [them]” (Leviticus 19:18, 34).

From one end of the Bible to the other, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus is described as “a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment” (Jonah 4:2b, Exodus 34:6, Psalm 86:15, et al.). As creatures created in the *imago dei*, in the image of God, we are also meant to be merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.

This is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus takes it even further in Luke 6: We are to turn the other cheek, offer our shirt with our coat, give to “everyone who asks of [us],” forgive, and generally treat others just as we would have them do unto us (Luke 6:27-38)! It sounds exhausting. And hard. And leaves us asking, “Really, Lord? Do we have to? Do I have to do all this and love my enemy and those who hate me?”

Jesus insists that it is in our best interest to do so. For if we do, the love, forgiveness, and mercy we shall give will be returned to us in “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

The late Vietnamese Buddhist, Tich Nhat Hanh, in his book “Living Buddha, Living Christ,” reflects on this passage in Luke. During the Vietnam War, he devoted his life to peace among all peoples. He asserts that when we look deeply into that which separates us from others, we see that, “The person you call your enemy is also suffering. As soon as you see that, the capacity of accepting and having compassion for him is there. Jesus called this ‘loving your enemy’. When you are able to love your enemy, he or she is no longer your enemy. The idea of enemy vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone who is suffering and needs your compassion. Doing this is sometimes easier than you might have imagined, but you need to practice. If you read the Bible but don’t practice, it will not help much. In Buddhism, practicing the teaching of the Buddha is the highest form of prayer. The Buddha said, ‘If someone is standing on one shore and wants to go to the other shore, he has to either use a boat or swim across. He cannot just pray, ‘Oh, other shore, please come over here for me to step across.’ To a Buddhist, praying without practicing is not real prayer.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Jesus, much like the Hebrew Prophets, Socrates, Lao Tzu, Confucius, and the Buddha, says these seemingly impossible things to us to help us imagine ways to move beyond that which seems to be hopeless. Perhaps the challenge of bridging our differences is not only possible but necessary. Perhaps all this loving, doing good, and praying for others, especially others we do not like at all, and who often do not like us, is the only way forward.

And it all begins with us – with each of us, one at a time allowing our imaginations to free us from the prison of our own hate, distrust, and most importantly our self-loathing. We have got to either take a boat with others to cross the rivers of hate, distrust, and self-loathing, or jump in and swim across on our own, not waiting for others to join us.

If we are going to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, if we are to do to others as we would have them do to us, we need to begin loving ourselves. Then, and only then, can we begin to give up and let go of judging and condemning others. If we seek forgiveness, how much are we willing to forgive? Can we begin to forgive and love ourselves just a little bit more so that we might begin to love others, even our enemies and those who hate us, just a little bit more? We do not have to like them. We just need to do

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<sup>1</sup> Hanh, Tich Nhat, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Riverhead Books, NY: 1995) p.78-79.

something helpful for them, something useful. Relieve their donkey of its burden. Give someone something to eat or drink. It need not be complicated.

If we take the first steps to love our enemies and those who hate us, Jesus tells us, “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” God’s mercy knows no bounds, no boundaries, no conditions. The sun shines on the just and the unjust. The rain pours down on the good and the bad. God is an equal opportunity provider of mercy. We are to be merciful as God is merciful – in just the same measure as we want God to be merciful to us.

Jesus is really asking, “Do you want to spend all your energy hating your enemies? Or do you really want to follow me and become children of the Most High?” Can we begin today to take one small step toward the kind of reconciliation Jesus knows is the only way forward for us all? Can we begin to love our enemies and pray for those who hate us? And if not now, when?

That storefront in Eleuthera may have it just right. It just may be that the starting place really is to sit down with our enemies and those who hate us, engage in some real hospitality, and see if we cannot begin to love one another as Jesus’s Father in heaven loves us all. Because “all” means “all.” We are all in this together, whether we know it or not! It may drive us all crazy, but at least that’s a start!

***The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek** has had the privilege of writing for *Sermons That Work* almost from its inception. He is currently priest-in-charge of a *Small But Mighty* congregation in the Diocese of Maryland: *Christ Church Forest Hill, Rock Spring Parish*. Kubicek just celebrated the 40th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, and is still running or walking with weights every morning, writing poetry, and playing music. He is in his eleventh year playing drums and harmonica for *On The Bus*, a *Grateful Dead* tribute band in the DC/ Baltimore Metro region. He just welcomed his third grandchild into the world and loves every minute of being Papi K. Life is good in *Christ’s Beloved Community!* All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well.*