



No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

by Rev. Joanne Thomson

A few weeks ago my Saturday errands took me to Target, where in the parking lot I saw a young mother struggling to get her toddler, the car seat, and packages into her car. I remember very well what that felt like, so I went over to help her with the complicated logistics of getting baby and stuff into the back seat. She smiled and thanked me, and I smiled back and said you're welcome, and I felt pretty darn good as I headed to where I was parked.

But as I walked by her car, I saw, beneath the Wisconsin license plate, a collection of bumper stickers that made it very clear that the owner of the car had great contempt for certain kinds of people; people, in fact, like me. I felt like I'd been punched, and to tell you the honest truth, my first unfiltered thought was that I wished I hadn't helped her. Someone who felt that way about people like me did not deserve my kindness.

And then I burst into laughter. God had played a trick on me. "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" God had gotten me to love my enemy before I even knew she was my enemy. In this teaching, Jesus is certainly talking about the enemies we acknowledge (North Korea, ISIS, all the rest), but he is also equally certainly talking about the enemies we live alongside. I'm sure my fellow Target shoppers thought I was some kind of nut, chuckling away at God's cleverness there in the parking lot. What a great parable God had dropped on me.

Not long ago, this would have been the end of this reflection. The moral of the story would be obvious. We are divided by barriers of our own and others' making. We struggle to affirm that all of us are the beloved children of God. The challenge of loving those who annoy, disagree with, offend, or reject us is with us always.

But we all have stories these days of how unusually painful it is to bridge the divides between us. Our divisions right now are on matters of deeply held principle and are very personal. Too often, we express our disagreement anonymously or in a crowd. A few months ago, Wisconsin made the front page of a national newspaper in an article that described how many of us have just stopped talking to each other about anything other than the weather and the Packers. Love requires us to stand up for what is true, just, and good, and love also requires us to bear one another's burdens, and those two requirements are pulling us in opposing directions. Pursuing either of these ends without embracing the other leads us to dehumanize each other, which is what happened in my bumper sticker experience.

Maybe God will have to surprise us into loving our enemies. We all know that God is able to work around our defenses. In fact, God specializes in working around our defenses. Maybe the best thing we can do at the moment is to trust that God will trick us into loving one another.