

“Why come to church?”

A homily by Episcopal monk and priest, David Vryhoff, SSJE. David is a friend of our rector and a brother at the monastery, Society of St. John the Evangelist, in Cambridge, Mass. We are putting together the final details for Brother David to come and lead a parish retreat this coming January. More information to come.

Why come to church? In an era of declining membership in mainline churches, in a time when more and more people – not just *young* people – are exercising the option not to attend church services, why do we keep coming back? What is it that we realize that we need, and that compels us to return to this place day after day, week after week?

There are many possible answers, and no doubt we would find a wide range of reasons if we polled the congregation today. Most of us would say we come first of all to worship and to give thanks to God. We realize that life is a gift – *all of it* – and we want and need to return thanks to the Giver of all that we have received. Many of us would say we come to be fed by Word and Sacrament, to be nourished and strengthened by the holy gifts of Bread and Wine for the service we feel called to give in the world. Others of us come for community, to join together with people who have made a commitment to belonging to God and to following Christ. We take seriously the call to join ourselves to the Body of Christ, and we find strength in solidarity with others in this place. But here is another important reason why we come to church: We come because we realize that living as a Christian in the world is *counter-cultural*, and we need frequently to be *reminded* of that, *instructed* in that, and *encouraged* in that. When we realize that God asks us to live in ways that are often out of step with the culture that surrounds us, that God invites us to embrace and embody a different set of principles and values than the world promotes, namely the values of the kingdom of God, then we understand how much we need the support of others as we make this difficult and sometimes perilous journey *upstream*.

The words of Jesus in today’s gospel lesson show us just how counter-cultural is the way along which Jesus calls us to follow him. “Love your enemies,” he tells us, “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” What could be more radical, more counter-cultural than that? Jesus is asking us to go against everything our culture has taught us – about competing for the prize, about climbing the ladder of success, about achieving whatever we put our minds to, about defeating those who threaten us, or who simply get in our way.

Notice that Jesus *assumes* that we will have enemies if we identify ourselves with him, that some will hate us, and curse us, and abuse us. He is teaching us how to respond when this happens to us. Notice, too, that he does not speak to us about hating or cursing or abusing others; such behavior is clearly incompatible with life in the kingdom of God.

How does Jesus teach us to respond to our enemies and to those who wish us harm? “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:29-31).

I don’t have to tell you that very few of us are able to do this consistently. Furthermore, not many of us even *want* to do this. It seems impossible to us, impractical. We worry that others will take advantage of us if we dare to be this vulnerable and this generous. Jesus is telling us, his followers, not to reciprocate when we are mistreated, not to retaliate when others try to hurt us or oppose us. We are not to act towards them as they have acted towards us: instead, we

are to return good for evil, love for hatred, blessings for curses, prayers in return for acts of hostility. In all things, Jesus says, our rule should be “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It’s outrageous. It’s impractical. It’s unrealistic. It’s beyond us. Why would we do this?

Because, says Jesus, this is the way of God. God has enemies. It may be that we ourselves, at one time or another, have behaved more like enemies than friends of God. And yet God has never stopped loving us, never stopped wanting us, never stopped giving us good things. “God proves his love for us,” Paul tells the Romans, “in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son...” (Romans 5:8, 10).

Don’t you think that God knows what it is to be hated, to be slandered, to be cursed and abused? Don’t you think that God knows what it feels like to give so freely and generously to all humankind the gift of life, and then watch us claim these gifts as our own due, refusing to acknowledge or give thanks to the Giver, boasting even that we are “self-made” people who have achieved all this by our own merit? And yet, Jesus tells us, God *continues* to “make his sun rise on the evil and on the good” and God *continues* to “send rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45). God *continues* to be patient and longsuffering, loving, generous and kind, in spite of our indifference and lack of gratitude.

So, *in imitation of God*, “love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36).

Why would we chose to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us? Because that is the way of God. That is how GOD responds to those who resist God and choose evil over good. God never stops loving, never stops caring, never stops blessing – even when the creatures whom God has made respond to this love with indifference or opposition.

Yes, it’s outrageous. It’s impractical. It’s unrealistic. It’s beyond us. Which is why we need GOD and why we need one another. Only God’s love abiding in us can love in this way, only God’s strength at work in our weakness can make us God-like in our words and actions.

Oh, it won’t be easy. It isn’t easy to see God making his sun rise and his rain fall on those whose lifestyle does not merit such favor. It’s hard to watch God being kind towards the ungrateful and the wicked. Sometimes we *resent* it when God is merciful. Like the elder brother who *resented* the generosity with which his loving father welcomed home his prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Or like the laborers who protested when the owner paid those who had worked only part of the day as much as he paid those who had labored *all* day (Matt. 20:1-16). “Are you *resentful* because I’m generous?” the owner asks. Or like the prophet Jonah, who pouted and grumbled when God chose to forgive the people of Nineveh rather than destroy them for their wickedness (Jonah 3:10-4:1). It can be hard to see the *depth* of God’s generosity, forgiveness and love, when we consider the recipients unworthy of such amazing grace. Like many of the religious people of Jesus’ day, we are scandalized by the wideness of his embrace: “See how he eats and drinks with *sinners* and *tax collectors*!”

It’s not easy to act as God acts. It’s not easy to be generous and forgiving, especially when, in our eyes, the recipient has not merited it. We’re afraid we’ll be taken advantage of, or that we’ll be seen as weak. Haven’t we all been warned, at some time or other, about giving to those who are *undeserving*?

And see how quickly we will resist such notions when they are applied to our social and political lives. We ignore our *obligation* to assist the poor because, we say, some abuse the system and take advantage of our generosity. We turn away people from our borders, maligning their character and intent, despising their difference, and insisting that they have no right to seek or to have what we have. We oppose and seek to control those whose difference frightens us – people of different faiths, of different gender identities, of different social and economic backgrounds. We look with suspicion on other nations and peoples, cautiously protecting what we believe belongs to us, shoring up our defenses, always putting our own interests first. *What would it look like if we loved as God loved, if we were as generous as God is generous, if we were as merciful as God is merciful, if we simply did to others what we would have them do to us?*

God promises to reward us if we do these things. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged,” says Jesus; “do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A 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 6:37-38). Truly, “your reward will be great, and you will *children of the Most High*, for [GOD] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” So, “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Love as God loves, give as God gives, be merciful as God is merciful, surprise people by your generosity and kindness – and everyone will know that you are “children of the Most High.”

This may not be the message you were hoping to hear when you came to church today. Certainly these are challenging and difficult words. But where else will you hear them? Where else will you be taught what it means to live as “children of the Most High”? Where else will you be encouraged to live in ways that are contrary to those promoted by the popular culture? Where else will you find people who are committed to learning and living the ways of God? It’s risky, to be sure. You may look foolish, out of step, impractical or weak in the eyes of others. But you will not be those things in the eyes of God. God will recognize you as his children, for that is what you will be.