

Sermon: Epiphany 7
Church of the Ascension, Chicago; Feb. 24/19
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*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.*

Love III; George Herbert (1593-1633)

*“There's nothing you can do that can't be done / Nothing you can sing that can't be sung /
Nothing you can say, . . . / It's easy / All you need is love.”* The Beatles.

In this morning's Gospel Jesus invites us to love our enemy. If most of us are really honest, we know that when we are having a bad day, it's a challenge to love members of our families, to say nothing of loving our neighbor, let alone our enemy. None the less, the love Jesus is calling us into this morning is a love that goes beyond our families and our neighbors. Jesus is calling us to love those who seem, on the surface, to share nothing in common with us, to love an enemy.

So, it would be entirely understandable if, as you listened to the Gospel this morning, the request from Jesus might have felt out of reach. Like George Herbert, in the poem with which I began, we might drawn back as love bids us welcome, guilty of our own humanness, and deeply aware of what it is we lack when it comes to love. And it doesn't make it any easier to have the Beatles tell us, in their popular song, “that it's easy, all you need is love”, when the realization of that love can feel so elusive and difficult.

Loving, really loving each and every day is not easy. And because the task is so difficult, we cannot hope to even make a beginning, without a significant engagement with the riches of Scripture and our Christian tradition, as resources in meeting what Jesus is asking of us.

Scripture is constantly reminding us that we, including our enemies, are made in God's image. We and our enemy are like God in God's very being, and that this likeness suggests a particular transforming potential. Our baptism sets us on a spiritual path that continually summons us to live more deeply into that human and divine likeness.

I want to take Love in George Herbert's poem seriously and explore with you this morning what it is we might lack as we try and live into that divine likeness. I want to do that by calling upon one particular theologian in our tradition for some advice as we attempt to make progress on the long journey of learning to love.

St. Irenaeus, who lived in the second century, has said some extraordinary things, like: “*God became a human being so that human beings might become like God*”. What he means by this, is that we Christians have a share in the divine life, as we learn to love as God loves, since God is love. Irenaeus goes on to say: “*How shall we be god who have not yet become a human being? Or how shall we be perfect when we have scarcely been made. For it is necessary . . . to keep to*

our position as a human being, . . . If then you are God's workmanship, await the hand of your maker." (Irenaeus. 4.39.2; SC.)

You see, Irenaeus believed that we make a beginning toward becoming like God, to love as God loves, to love our enemy, and anybody else for that matter, by attending to what it means to be fully human as we are continually, even now, being made in God image.

"Await the hand of our maker." He says. Irenaeus is reminding us that we have not yet been fully created. We have not yet entered into the fullness of our humanity. Waiting upon that fullness is what the Christian journey is about. There is much in us that is yet to be accomplished.

This Christian truth is a cause for great hope, as we ponder the daunting task of loving our enemy. The suggestion here is that learning to love as God loves, is not something we realize in a moment, or for that matter in a year or two, but is the long result of time. It is of course, also a work that requires our co-operation, as the moistened clay is molded under the skillful hands of the potter.

All of this suggests that we Christians are on a very long journey taken under the support of God's constant creative action, a journey that will change us, as God's love takes possession of our lives over time. We are all on a long ethical pilgrimage. Patience and self-acceptance will be helpful as we strive to make progress.

We might also reflect on our rich biblical tradition once again, as a way of more deeply appreciating the significance of the transformative journey Irenaeus is inviting us into. We have been considering the implications of the scriptural witness that we are made in God's image.

A text that is always read during the Epiphany Season, is the story of Jesus changing water into wine at Cana, recorded in the Gospel According to St. John. At its core this is a story about transformation, not just the transformation of ordinary water into extraordinary wine, but a story about the power of God to transform us. This making of the extra-ordinary out of the ordinary is the spiritual transformation of a lifetime.

As Archbishop Rowan Williams says, "I have to utterly depend on . . . an awareness of myself that reminds me where I start each day—not as a finished saint but as a needy person still struggling to grow." — (*Rowan Williams, Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*)

And so, this commandment to love will call for prayer, discernment, and constant practice. Loving our enemies, loving those who have wronged us, those outside our familial clan or country, those who are radically different from us is the hardest commandment. It runs counter to our natural inclinations. But natural inclinations are not the issue here, but the grace-filled power of God to change and transform us over time.

As we think about a way to love our enemies in the particular time in which God has placed us, there are important considerations. Does this mean loving criminals, murderers and terrorists? It is not clear whether the scriptures have these folks in mind when it records Jesus calling us to

love our enemies. But I suspect that part of the call to love our enemy, is a willingness not to give up hope for the transformation of our enemy, whoever that enemy may be, because they too, like us are made in the image of God. God most definitely loves them as God loves us.

To lift up the Scripture once again, we will remember these words of Jesus: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (There’s a hint of that divine image again.) Jesus says that God “*makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*, “*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*” (Matt. 45:44-55)

Can we be open to moving forward on a spiritual path that will ultimately lead to claiming our enemy as a member of our family, as Jesus does here. Can we see the enemy as one of us?

When we hear Jesus inviting us to “love your enemies,” we certainly can ask what kind of love is needed to do this? Jesus is talking here of a love that is the most extreme and self-sacrificial.

It’s hard enough to love the people we love. Enemies are after all – enemies. But Jesus is talking about loving them in the most extreme way. Why does he ask this of us? For love itself, for the sheer love of it, the kind of Love, that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things”. (*I Cor. 13:7*).

All I have offered here this morning is one great big huge hard thing. There are no easy ways to begin loving in this way. To begin loving our enemy as Christ loves us involves a daily commitment to love with all our hearts, all our souls and all our minds. It involves a commitment to the possibility of our own and our enemy’s transformation.

How exactly is this done? Well, if we can daily turn toward the divine spark that is in us, God can gradually free us from ourselves, change the way we think and feel about ourselves and others, and direct our hearts and minds towards the joy and the pain of continually being remade into God’s loving likeness. As we go through this painful and difficult transformation, both in our families and in the world, we will be on the path of beginning to see everyone as God sees them. And when at last, at the end of the journey, when Christ is all in all, there will finally be nothing lacking.

It means consenting to the hope that the divine love continues to re-make us, day by day, month by month, year by year, as we wait upon the hand of your maker”, (*Irenaeus. 4.39.2; SC.*) “whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine”: (Ephesians 3:20.). Amen.