

Message for 2-20-22

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

Last Sunday I spent a lot of time explaining the theory of the Gospels sharing material but having distinct theological agendas. I invited you to look at the diversity of the Gospels and celebrate them as treasure hunts for the truth that will enrich our lives and deepen our spirituality.

I define spirituality as an orientation toward life. For example, is like a friend or an enemy? Let's read the Word About Life with that in mind. Here is more of Luke's Sermon on the Plain.

*'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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.*

*'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But 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 Heavenly Parent is merciful. (Luke 6:27-36)*

Love your enemies. Do good to those who would harm you. Lend without expecting to be paid back. This is the way of an orientation toward life that makes you children of the Spirit of Life and Love.

This is not passive. It is an aggressive action that undermines the ethic of retaliation and vengeance.

This past week one of the Tik Tok sensations was a video of a megachurch preacher claiming that in the process of casting out a demon it was revealed to him that six witches were trying to infiltrate his church. Two of them were in his wife's bible study. He made a long list of putdowns. It was something like you ragged eared, flea-bitten, devil-worshipping, blah, blah, blah. With great enthusiasm, he loudly proclaimed that he had their first names, their last names, and their addresses. He said he was giving them a warning to say nothing and to get out in the name of Jesus. I do not know how many women got up and walked out but if I was there I would be afraid to walk out and I would be afraid not to walk out.

All of us are familiar with this kind of hateful and fearful religion. It is like they have a roulette wheel in the pastor's study. They spin the wheel to see who they are going to preach hate about this week. This is quite contrary to the Word About Life.

A deep insight of our religious tradition is our spirituality is measured as much by who our enemies are and how we treat them as by who and what we love. Too many people, like the preacher mentioned earlier, define their spirituality by who they hate, not how they struggle to love and I mean really love their enemies.

We are still in the season of Epiphany. We are asking what would life look like if we really brought the love of God into the world. We go even further in our proclamation. The love of God is already in the world and is the foundation of all of life. We just need to see it and live into it.

Yet, love of enemies right now feels quaint, naïve, and impractical. I do not think it is quaint, naïve, or impractical. I do think it is countercultural and counter to the conventional wisdom that we are immersed in our whole lives. However, it is not counter-productive. It is the only way to be productive against suffering and hate.

Every major religion acknowledges we do not resist evil with evil and hate with more hate. On the surface, the teaching to love your enemies may seem unrealistic but it is the most realistic. It acknowledges the way life is. You will have enemies and you will suffer. It also acknowledges that hate and suffering do not decrease with more hate and suffering piled on. On the surface, it may seem that love is weak and vengeance is strong but we are called to look below the surface of things.

When we hear this phrase, “love your enemies” our minds go to the greatest extremes and the most dramatic examples. Our minds go to the warmongering politician or murderer. Let us be practical. Let’s think in terms of our family members, a neighbor, a co-worker, and friends that are sometimes frenemies. We are most vulnerable to the people closest to us and they may cause the greatest suffering in our lives.

There are a couple of things to take into consideration when we strive to love our enemies.

First, love in this context is not a warm fuzzy feeling. It is hoping for the best future for your enemy. Your enemy thinks that their best future might depend on them creating your worst day. The deeper truth is their best future is best when it is not depending on anyone else. The opposite is probably true. Their best future is connected to our best future and it is best when we can make this happen together.

Second, in a branch of Buddhism, there is a middle ground between love and hate. It is non-hate. I like this idea because it allows room for us to grow. It may be too big of a leap to go from hate to love, so let us strive to move the needle one place in a positive direction. When we can take the emotional intensity of hate out of the spiritual journey we begin to transfer the power our enemy has over us, to empower ourselves. It is easier to go from non-hate to love. It is an act of compassion for ourselves to move from anger, fear, annoyance, or being consumed by injustice to non-hate. This step of self-compassion is in line with the spiritual truth that you cannot really love others, friends, or enemies if you do not love yourself.

Third, I said it earlier and I want to say it again. We are taught that love is weak and vengeance is strong. We are taught that vulnerability leads to people taking advantage of us and we become the world’s doormat.

In the book *Dune*, the new overseer for the desert planet takes a goblet full of water and pours the precious element on the ground, and says to have power over something is to be able to destroy it. I first read this in college in the late 70s. It struck me as false then and I still think it is false. Anyone can be destructive but true power is in the capacity to create, not destroy.

To return hate with hate to our enemies is to enter a contest to see who can destroy the other. But to love our enemies is to create new possibilities and a new reality.

To love our enemies is greatly misunderstood as an all-or-nothing proposition to the point of being impractical and unrealistic. I want to correct this understanding so that the conventional wisdom of the world is not used as an excuse not to try the wisdom of God. This doesn't mean that we are not called upon to defend ourselves and defend those who are most vulnerable. We can use force but not to destroy our enemies but to disarm them. If we destroy them it is a hollow victory for we also destroy the opportunity to love and transform our life together.

Love your enemies. Do good to those who would harm you. Lend without expecting to be paid back. This is the way of an orientation toward life that makes you children of the Spirit of Life and Love.

This is not passive. It is an aggressive action that undermines the ethic of retaliation and vengeance. To love our enemies may be the first step in creating a world where every person is radically affirmed and barriers are turned into bridges of inclusion, justice, and spirituality.