

Sermon on Loving Your Enemies
Rev. John G. Smith at Leaside United Church
March 2, 2008

Based on Sermon on the Mount text in Matthew 5 (You have heard it said, but I say to you)

Martin Luther King preached on the Sermon on the Mount every year, especially the part about loving your enemies. He said that he had to come back to the passage year after year and apply all the new insights he had had during the previous year.

One of those insights came as he and his brother were driving along a dark road one night.

His brother was noticing that no one seemed to be dimming their lights as they approached. This annoyed him, and with each passing car, he just got more furious. Finally he said: The next car that approaches, I'm going to blind them with my high beams. Martin cautioned him: he said: *if you do that my brother, then you will only increase the level of anger and frustration and hate in the world. Do you really want to do that?*

Hi brother of course said no, then realized, when he looked down, that he had his bright lights on already. He sheepishly turned them down.

Gandhi used to say: *an eye for an eye just leaves the whole world blind.*

In this particular chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, we get a real glimpse of how Jesus understood the kingdom of God. It wasn't just an imaginary realm that you pop in and out of; it wasn't a far-off place; it was now, right now. AND it was not just outside of us, but also inside of us, and it permeates the layers of our self, including our free-will, colouring our heart's intent and our mind's desires, with a different and higher purpose.

I don't always know HOW to follow these reversals Jesus speaks of; but like Martin Luther King, I don't want to increase the level of anger and frustration and hate in the world. God knows, there's enough of that already.

Empire would have us believe that anger and hate are normal.

Empire: Loving our enemies is some sort of leftist pipe-dream, it's not based in reality.

Empire: If someone hurts me, I have the right to hurt them back.

We saw this all played out on a large scale in the days following the attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

It was a horrible act, callous, inhuman and gross.

None of us will ever forget it, nor the pain and grief associated with it. I have many American friends for whom the attack was personal, even if they didn't live in New York or have anyone in their family involved in it. It felt like a personal attach on each and every American citizen.

(that's empire speaking; it drives the cycle of violence)

How would Jesus have responded?

What would have been the modern-day equivalent of turning the other cheek, or of loving the neighbour?

We know that the US did not choose the third way, the Jesus way. I submit it's a lot more complicated than this. But what if they had???

Still, we must ask: did the retaliatory act of invading Iraq and killing Saddam Hussein make any difference?

Did it reduce the hatred many people in the Middle East feel toward the USA?

Did it reduce the amount of hatred and discord and anger anywhere in the world?

Even at home, after Saddam was buried and the feeling of sweet revenge passed over, did the levels of hatred reduce?

Charles Talbert calls the six "reverse" sayings in today's reading, VERBAL ICONS.

By this he means that they are word pictures in which we glimpse the divine character; AND if we take them seriously, we see God's intent for our lives.

These icons shape us. They get into our marrow. They colour our heart's intent and our mind's desires if we let them.

A lot of us know people who have rejected God. It seems the fashionable thing to do these days.

If you were to ask someone to describe the God they have rejected, what do you think they would say?

God of judgment, condemnation

God of lightning bolts, hell and eternal damnation?

Jesus rejected that God too.

I have rejected that God, because this is not the God of the Bible.

If we consider these verbal icons as pointers to the heart of God, what do we see? (open Bibles to chapter 5 in Matthew)

We see a God of quick and ready forgiveness

A God who values our bodies as temples of love and beauty

(remembering that we are all created in God's image)

We see a God who is forever faithful, even when we are not

We see a God whose word is consistent and whose actions portray a benevolent universe

We see a God on the side of the humble and the humiliated, and a God who turns the other cheek when we strike back against (him)

We see a God of agape love, whose grace falls like rain on both the good and the evil, and whose purpose is to transform hearts of hate into hearts of love.

Frankly, that's a God I can worship. It fills my heart with love. It makes me want to live differently. It offers me hope that there is a third way, a better way to be human. And I see that better way in Jesus.

Because of these amazing pictures that Jesus offers us, we no longer need to fear God: we are to LOVE God.

Jesus offers us his whole heart and soul and mind in these words, his "SHEMA", so that we may be like him and live as children of God.

Empire hates love.

Empire hates children of God.

Empire expects us to come to church, hear these words, like Kierkegaard's ducks, then go back to our lives, and not upset the status quo.

And frankly, that would be easy.

It isn't rocket science to understand that most church people aren't very good church people, if we believe what people outside the church think of us.

I remember we had a young boy in one of our confirmation classes who thought that we (our class) and our church were a bunch of hypocrites. He said that church people were the most judgmental awful people he had ever met, and he was including his own parents in that "judgment".

Rich Mullins, a contemporary Christian songwriter responds to this:

DUH! he says, EVERY TIME we come together we are CONFESSING we are hypocrites. We are spiritual weaklings! We need God to help us get it right!

Some times we reduce Christianity to a few basic values and principles. But Jesus didn't come to introduce new values and principles, although he did do that.

Hi real purpose was to bring dead people, back to life!

When I was in Hawaii a couple of years ago with my family, we decided that we had to go and visit the Pearl Harbour site and museum.

Everyone told us to go as early as possible because the lineups were always huge. It felt like a visit to a sacred shrine. We were joining a pilgrimage.

After seeing the video presentation, then taking the boat out to the site where the Arizona lay in the harbour, I was overcome with a deep sadness.

Pearl Harbour was awful; no question. It was a raw wound and it cut deep.

But Pearl Harbour led to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More destruction.

I'm pretty sure, that if someone breaks my leg intentionally, I'm going to want to find a way to break their leg too, in return. And maybe both arms, just for good measure. But if I do that, where does the cycle end?

Henri Nouwen, one of the great religious philosophers of our time said this:
*In the face of the oppressed I recognize my own face;
in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hands.*

Martin Luther King, in his famous sermon, says something really helpful:
Jesus doesn't ask us to LIKE our enemies. he asks us to LOVE them.
You know, I suppose there are a lot of people we don't like. And of course, there are a lot of people who don't like each of us. Believe me, as a preacher man, I sure know what that feels like.

But like is a lot different than love.

Love, agape love, is the way of God.

This is the term for the God-love that Jesus speaks of in the Sermon.

This kind of love requires us to look at one another with the eyes of God.

To look upon the person we might greatly dislike, but somehow see in them, a person that God also loves.

It could be that God isn't finished with that person yet. God knows, God isn't quite finished with ME yet!

An additional challenge here is that, when you look into the eyes of those you might despise, and see God's child, then we see Jesus in that person, the one WE love and who loves us.

Upsetting the normal cycle of hatred, violence, retribution and vengeance is what God is all about.

But because we humans are so thick and so dense, and so slow to learn, it seems that God always has to resort to a dramatic display of selfless humility in the face of the power of Empire.

Not only did Jesus teach us about the way of God, he showed us:
that my friends, is the reason for the cross.