

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
February 20, 2022 – 7 Epiphany  
Luke 6:27-38  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Last Sunday I explained that because Easter is late this year – April 17<sup>th</sup> – we have “extra” Sundays after Epiphany and hear gospel readings we seldom hear. Last week our lesson was the first portion of the Sermon on the Plain, the parallel in Luke’s Gospel of the more familiar Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew’s Gospel. This morning we heard the remainder of that important teaching of Jesus.

Our reading began with a few words we might easily skip over: “Jesus said, ‘I say to you that listen.’” These words signal that Jesus is speaking to the people whose attention he has already “grabbed.” To those who listen Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” I would venture to say that these aren’t the words of Jesus we would choose for recruiting new converts to the Jesus Movement! We know how popular John 3:16 is. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” A much better recruiting slogan, isn’t it? Full of assurance and promise instead of challenge.

The author of this gospel doesn’t deny the truth of the message in John 3:16, but he reminds those of us who have already been “grabbed” by Jesus that Jesus is calling us to a life with a high bar of righteousness. Think of righteousness as having our will in alignment with God’s will. Jesus said, “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” A very challenging teaching! We might even say that these exhortations are contrary to “human nature.” Isn’t it much more “natural” to hate the people who hate us, to take revenge on those who harm us, to curse those who curse us? We might think so, but Jesus is saying that isn’t true “human nature.” Our true nature is to be like God because we are God’s children, made in the image of God.

How are we to be like God? God “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” Other translations of the word here translated “wicked” are “useless” or “worthless.” God is kind and merciful to all. Because we are created by God in God’s image, we are meant to be kind and merciful to all – righteous and unrighteous, useful and useless, worthy and worthless. When we renew our baptismal vows, we promise to “respect the dignity of every human being,” a promise very much in the spirit of this lesson.

I think we need to be careful about how we interpret this teaching of Jesus. Does it mean that we should allow people to harm us or other people and do nothing? What are we meant to do about people who harm and exploit others? How might we “love” and “do good” to them? Conversations between the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama of Tibet recorded in “The Book of Joy” afford profound insight into this question. Compassion and love are the foundation of their teachings. The Dalai Lama said, “You must not hate those who do harmful things. The compassionate thing is to do what you can to stop them – for they are harming themselves as well as those

who suffer from their actions” (page 226). Both men agree that to love a person who causes people pain means to try to stop the person’s actions, not with hatred for the person, but instead with a concern for that person’s present and future welfare. If we are the object of someone’s hurtful behavior, the only way to stop that behavior may be to remove ourselves from the situation or relationship. If our hearts are full of compassion and love, we can stop a person’s harmful actions out of love and not for revenge. We can be more rather than less like God.

Jesus teaches us to act like what we are – people made in the image and likeness of God. He says that to love those who love us is comparatively easy and no different from what worldly people do. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” To love those who are our enemies is what sets us apart as children of our heavenly Father.

When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he is not talking about feeling affection for them. Love is about action and behavior. Jesus is teaching us to do good to those who would do us harm, who may have done us harm. When Jesus instructs us to “pray for those who abuse you,” I think such prayer must include praying for the welfare of those who harm us. I think such prayer may very well include praying for their repentance and transformation. We believe that God wants what is truly best for every person. If our wills are aligned with God’s will, then we will also want what is truly best for ourselves and for everyone else – even our enemies.

The ancient texts of the Bible give witness to some very troubling aspects of human life and human interactions that are true across cultures and centuries: the powerful exploit and hurt the powerless, people take what they can for themselves regardless of the rights and needs of others, injustice goes on and on without consequences, and so on. It takes great faith to live in this world and not lose heart. It takes great faith in God.

As we go through life we make choices about how to live, about who to become. Jesus calls us – challenges us – to live according to God’s will for all people. I’m sure we all know how very difficult this can be, how much we need God’s grace as we try. It may be helpful to remember that human beings cannot ultimately “have it both ways.” We cannot choose darkness and dwell in the light. We cannot have hatred in our hearts and know the peace and joy of having loving hearts. We cannot fail to be generous and know the freedom that generosity brings. Evil people may be successful in the world, but they cannot also know the consolations of being loving and good. Even in this life.

The words of this morning’s psalm [Psalm 37] remind us that God will ultimately set things right. “Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes. Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil. For evildoers shall be cut off.... Put your trust in the Lord and do good.... Take delight in the Lord, and he shall give you your heart’s desire.” By the grace and help of God, may our heart’s desire be God and the love of God, now and always. In Jesus’ name. Amen.