

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – March 2, 2025  
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42; Luke 6:27-38  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke is a 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 teaching is extremely important as well as challenging.

Our lesson began with these words: "Jesus said, 'I say to you that listen.'" His teaching is for all people who are willing to listen and listen attentively. To those who listen Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Immediately we know 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." 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. 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. And if we are the object of someone's hurtful behavior, the only way to stop that behavior may be for us to remove ourselves, distance 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 ought to include praying for the welfare of those who harm us, prayer that 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. This is a high bar indeed!

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, people bully and malign the weak and those who are “different,” and so on. It takes great faith to live in this world and not lose heart. It takes great faith in God.

We are living in very troubled times, as you well know. Hatred is coming out in people on all sides of the issues we are dealing with in this country. Religious people are no exception. Whatever your political position or your opinion on other matters, please remember that to have a passion for justice and for human rights and welfare is perfectly in keeping with our faith in God. So is witnessing to that passion in voice and action. However, hating other human beings is not in keeping with our faith in God. Please be careful of what is in your heart. Try to keep hatred from taking root. If hatred has made a home in your heart, pray that God will help you transform hatred into a godly passion for what is right, for justice. Stop yourself from speech or writing that is full of hatred. Be careful not to add to the violence and hatred in the world. Let’s help one another do this, for the sake of ourselves and everyone.

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 – we see many examples today of that fact – but they cannot also know the consolations of being loving and good and merciful. Even in this life.

The words of this morning’s psalm 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. Put your trust in the Lord and do good.... Take delight in the Lord, and he shall give you your heart’s desire.” May our hearts desire nothing but God and love. Amen.