

7 Epiphany A 2017
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Kellers Church
February 19, 2017 "Love Your Enemies"

I've been thinking a lot about enemies lately. I suppose we all have. Whether refugees are our enemies. Or Russians. When I was listening to a biography of Pope Francis, I heard about a mother whose son died in a nightclub fire, and how angry she was that Pope Francis (then Bishop Bergoglio) ministered not only to the survivors and family members of those who died, but that he also ministered to the band members, who were accused of setting off the fireworks that started the fire. They were supposed to be enemy; but he had compassion on them, too. Today is the 75th anniversary of Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt, ordering all residents of Japanese descent to be transported to internment camps, to prevent them from committing acts of sabotage. Americans were considered enemies.

In today's gospel Jesus says, "love your enemies." Which is asking a lot. But Jesus goes farther than that. He gets annoyingly specific. Jesus encourages his listeners to, if we are hit on one side, turn our head; and to give our coat to someone who took our jacket; and to walk a second mile for an occupying soldier (who could legally require anyone to carry his belongings for one mile). Jesus insists his followers be willing to endure for the other person. Even those who are cruel, and do not want what is best for us. It is outrageous that Jesus insists on such radical self-giving. I don't think I can do it. And – I probably don't *want* to do it. Like the prophet Jonah, I want to hate my enemies, thank you very much.

I do not yet will what God wills. And, chances are, neither do you. That is why we start our worship with a confession. Oh, God knows very well all that we have done and all that we have left undone of God's good will; but in worship we confess to make ourselves ready to enter into God's presence. We say who we are, honestly – sinners in need of God's forgiveness.

In some ways, we are God's enemies. Of course, we prefer to think of ourselves as God's friends. But we don't give ourselves completely into God's desires. Consider our first reading, from Leviticus, the book that contains most of the Holiness Code of the Old Testament. The Lord called for the people to be holy, as God is holy. Then the Lord defines holiness in very specific and practical ways: leaving some of the garden produce to be picked by "the poor and the alien," so they will have both food and dignity. Holiness is also not stealing, and not cheating, and not defrauding. The Holiness laws include judging fairly, not on the basis of who you know or who can help you out. Again, with the specifics. I often try to do most of the acts listed. I try to be honorable, and generous, and judge only on the facts. But I get pretty choosy about which facts I pay attention to. And way too often I am not generous at all. God would be justified in considering me more enemy than friend.

But the last of the Holiness laws we have today is the climax: to love your neighbor as yourself. Whether your neighbor is the victim of a terrible fire or the one who caused it. Of course, our neighbors are both. If we are to be in any way holy as God is holy, we should love ourselves, even as we expect more of ourselves than what we do or think in our worst moments. And if we love ourselves, we should also recognize that we disappoint both ourselves and God. If we are to be holy as God is holy, we should love even those who act against us. As God loves us, even when we act against God's good and clear will.

That advice that Jesus gives, “Love your enemies” would be easier to ignore, if Jesus had not actually done that – loved his enemies. Do you remember the story of the rich man who considered following Jesus, until Jesus told him to give up everything he owned? The gospel says, “Jesus loved him.” Jesus’ told the tax collector who was collecting more than he should have to restore money to the people he had cheated. Those were words of love; he allowed the man to do the right thing ~ to get right with neighbor and with God. On the cross, Jesus prayed for those who put him there, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Yes, Jesus definitely walked the walk; he didn’t just talk the talk. He loved his enemies. And that makes it even more important for us who are his followers, to do the same thing. Jesus made himself vulnerable to those he came in contact with. His was a vulnerability grounded in love. Jesus was vulnerable because he refused to withdraw, he remained accessible; he put himself at people’s disposal.

Jesus said “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [why?] so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” We know that children tend to do what their parents do. If you as a parent utter a particular word with strong emphasis, you should not be surprised when your little child utters that same word with much the same emphasis. But our children also mimic us in showing kindness: in standing up for those being bullied, in offering to help, in being delighted learners. So I join Jesus in saying today, Love, so you can be like your God, in whose image you were made. Love, so you can be the best person you can be. Love, so that your enemies can be more like God’s image, also. Love your enemies so you can see in them what God sees in them: a beloved child. Which is how God sees us, after all. Former enemies; now great and dear friends.

But on this Sunday, even as I emphasize Jesus’ call to love your enemies, I do not want you to confuse vulnerability grounded in love with a willingness to be a doormat. Bishop Bergoglio took the anger from the grieving mother ~ but he didn’t let her anger stop him from loving the band members who started the awful fire; or from loving her. The love he knew from God was enough to love them both, and to respect himself, also. Jesus calls us to a vulnerability grounded in love; but Jesus’ call does not deny our worthiness. It is the more perfect way, the way that leads to being God’s children ~ called to love God, fully. To love ourselves fully. To love everyone else, fully. Even those who act as our enemies. Even those we regard as our enemies without any actions on their part at all. It is not easy; but it is worth it. Amen