

March 4, 2011

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

Can we love everybody? In the Christian tradition, the high water mark of Jesus’ teaching is in what is known as *the Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7). Many of us pastors refer to this as *the best of Jesus*. This is the message where, among other things, Jesus urges us to *love our enemies* and to *turn the other cheek*.

Mark Twain once said about the Bible: *I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don’t understand. It’s those parts I do understand that give me fits.*

As we deal with contentiousness on multiple levels—in our family lives, with local and state government (the strife in Wisconsin over collective bargaining comes to mind), in our nation’s capital, as well, and now with the grassroots upheaval in the Middle East—these teachings of Jesus invite us to higher spiritual ground.

Simply put, they raise the bar on how we think about and deal with one another.

Can we love everybody? Can we love those whom we most despise in life, those whom we find most reprehensible, whom we view as doing the most harm to public life? A few conservative talk show hosts come to mind for me.

On a human level, it is easier to *love* people than to *like* them. To love another human being is to identify with that human person as—like us—another human being, with a life-story and with feelings ... with joys and sorrows, strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points.

There is a common chord of humanity in each of us. It is this common chord that we seek to lift up everyday in our efforts to promote peace and harmony—both in our human, as well as our international relations.

Do we have enemies? As we try to sort all of this out, who is our enemy? Do we, indeed, have enemies? It may well be the case that we do, even if we don’t know it. But, again, who are our enemies?

Are they the ones who disagree with us about those things we hold most sacred in life? Are they those who make an idol of money, power, or of religion and the Bible and then demonize those who disagree with them? Who is our enemy?

Is it Al Qaeda, or radical Islam? In our own religious traditions, is it fundamentalist extremists? Are they our enemies? Usually, people whom we think of as our enemies are different from us in significant ways.

Hate is a strong word. There is a sting to it that goes deep. Do we really *hate* other people? I hope not; because if we think about it, hating another human being serves to diminish us; it renders us a smaller person.

How big a circle, how big a love? In reflecting on the size and the reaches of our love, I'm reminded of a meditation by Ron Buford who used to head-up the *God Is Still Speaking* (church growth) initiative for my denomination, *The United Church of Christ*. He was talking about Pete Kaprowski from Pilgrim UCC in Cleveland, Ohio.

As he tells it, when a new pastor came to the church and introduced all sorts of new ideas, Pete struggled with many of them—especially *Open and Affirming*, which affirmed the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons in the life of the church.

When Buford interviewed Pete near the end of his life, Pete mentioned how grateful he was that his church had not left him behind in his old thinking, no matter how difficult it had been for him to hear God's call differently. Over the years, Pete went on to become an ardent supporter of the things he had once struggled against.

The last time Ron Buford saw Pete, much older by then, Pete had been brought to church that Sunday by two gay men in the congregation who were among the many caring people at the church who helped look after him.

Can we love everybody? Maybe not; but, again, we can try, seeking always to enlarge the circle of our love. My guess is what God wants for any of us is to *live in such a way that those who know us, but do not know God, will come to know God because they know us*.

What a vision! What a hope! What a world!