

## “Can we love everybody?”

February 20, 2011

Text: *Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 5:38-48*

### I.

**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 of the Bible I DO understand that give me fits.*

In our reading this morning from Jesus' well known *Sermon on the Mount*, the bar is set high: **love your enemies ... and turn the other cheek.**

We've all heard these pronouncements of Jesus all of our lives. They sound lofty and divine. And while we Christians like to have these teachings as cornerstones of our faith, most of us may well wonder to ourselves: *Is he serious?*

And yet, divine expectations are not something to be trivialized. When we are baptized into **the body of Christ** that is the Church, we make a *covenant* to be a part of this new, often times, *alternative* community. My guess is, from God's point of view, this is a big deal. There are consequences to *covenant*.

*Covenant*, of course, refers to our primary relationship with God. Through the patriarchs—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel—through the Sinai Covenant with Moses—on through the *new creation* covenant with Jesus Christ, we are called to covenant.

Simply put, this means there is a mutuality of obligations. Leviticus cites a long list, starting with generosity ...

1. *when you reap your harvest, don't reap to the edges of your field ...i.e., don't strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes ... leave them for the poor and the alien ...*
2. *And don't steal ... don't lie and deceive or swear falsely ...*
3. *Don't defraud your neighbor ... don't hold back wages unfairly ...*
4. *be just are fair in all your dealings ...*
5. *and don't hate in your heart any of your kin ...or anyone else.*
6. *And, finally, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

In our religious traditions, which include both the Old and the New Testaments, demands are made ... and the language is pretty straight forward.

## II.

In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus' teachings are like a new disclosure of God's truth. Again and again, in **Matthew 5**, he says: *You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you*. Repeatedly, he uses these words:

1. *You have heard that it was said ... you shall not murder ... or commit adultery or swear falsely ... but I say to you ...*
2. And in our reading this morning: **You have heard that it was said ... an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth ... or, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy ... but I say to you ...** and then Jesus goes on to say: *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*.

That's powerful stuff.

**Can we love everybody?** Can we *love* those whom we most despise in life ... those whom we find most reprehensible? A few conservative talk show hosts come to mind for me.

On a human level, it's easier to love people than like them. To love another human being is to identify with that human person as—like us—another human being—with feelings ... a life story ... with joys and sorrows ... strengths and weaknesses ... good points and bad points. There is a common chord of humanity in each of us.

## III.

As we wrestle with all of this and seek to open our mind, heart and spirit to these teachings of Jesus, **Who is our enemy?** Do we have enemies? **Who is our enemy?**

1. Is it those who disagree with us about those things we hold most sacred, most important?
2. Is it those in other ethnic groups, races, nations, and religions that, reputedly, don't like us just because we're different from them?
3. Is it Al Qaeda? Is it radical Islam? Or, in our own faith tradition, is it fundamentalist Christian extremists?
4. Is our enemy the criminal people in the world who do the most awful, reprehensible things to people? The murderers, rapists, brutality thugs who have no regard for human life, no regard for the holy, no regard for anything?
5. Is it those who make an idol of money, power ... or of religion and the Bible and then demonize those who disagree with them?

6. Is it the people who just don't like us ... for whatever, perhaps, silly reasons?

Who are our enemies?

Usually, people whom we think of as enemies are different from us in significant ways. As we challenge ourselves today with this tough teaching of Jesus, how do we feel about those who are most different from us?

#### IV.

*Hate* is a strong word. Our reading from **Matthew** uses the *hate* word:

***You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.***

Do we really hate other people? We have to each answer this question for ourselves, but I hope we don't. To actually hate someone, another human being, diminishes us, doesn't it? Doesn't it make us *less* of a loving, giving, caring, forgiving, and merciful person? Doesn't it make us a smaller human being?

As Christians, as followers of Christ, as believers who seek to *put on the mind of Christ* everyday in our faith walk; as aspiring Christians who seek to *choose life* every day in our most important *life choices*, to harbor hate in our spirit diminishes us. It makes us decidedly less *Christ like*.

**Can we love everybody?**

Maybe not. But it just might be that what God wants us to try.

Perhaps, what this is about in the BIG PICTURE of things is our personal, spiritual growth. We grow most, in a personal way, when we love outside our comfort zone; in other words—when we seek to love those who aren't necessarily like us and don't necessarily agree with us.

To love the one whom we would be most expected to hate or despise is good for our spirit. Not that we have to agree with them on anything ... but that we, at least, try to find a more common ground of understanding.

When we love, outside our comfort zone, it lifts us to a higher level of love, a higher level of respect for the holy, for the most sacred in the human spirit. And along the way (keep in mind, it's a process), we become a bigger and better person.

#### V.

The Bible reveals a lot of wisdom in this teaching of Jesus.

Again, CHECK IT OUT! *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;* ... and, then, get this:

*For God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

So, there's a strong element of divine justice here. God doesn't discriminate. The sun shines on both the evil and the good ... and God's rain comes to replenish life for both the righteous and the unrighteous.

And CHECK OUT verse 40 here:

1. *For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax-collectors do that?*
2. *And if you greet and welcome only your sisters and brothers, what's the big deal? Even the Gentiles (the ostensible enemies of the Jews) do that.*

If we want to be truly *Christ like* in our faith, our love has to grow. What this is about is the size of our spirit and the size of our heart.

## VI.

In thinking about the size and the reaches of our love, I'm reminded of a meditation by **Ron Buford** who used to head up the UCC *God Is Still Speaking* initiative. He was reflecting on a passage from the Transfiguration and wondering what Jesus, Moses and Elijah might have to say to each other. With Moses, symbolizing *law giver*, and Elijah, the *prophets*, together they presented a possible new revelation about our faith journey.

And then, going on, he noted how it also reminded him of **Pete Kaprowski**, from Pilgrim UCC in Cleveland, Ohio.

*When a new, young pastor came to the church and introduced all sorts of new ideas, Pete struggled with and against many of them—especially Open and Affirming (ONA), which affirmed the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons in the life of the church.*

*When I interviewed Pete near the end of his life, **Ron Buford** went on, he 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 see the world and hear God's call differently. Pete became an ardent supporter of the things he had once struggled against.*

*The last time I saw Pete, he added, much older by then, he had been brought to church that Sunday by two gay men in the congregation who were among the many caring*

*people at Pilgrim UCC who helped look after him.*

## VII.

**Can we love everybody?** Maybe not ... but, again, we can try, seeking always to enlarge the circle of our love. You see, love—along with patience and kindness, along with generosity, compassion and forgiveness—breaks down any barriers that might divide us. It unifies us and brings us together. It reveals to us what we have in common as human beings ... and then, the point is, to build on it (what we have in common).

Like this man in the UCC church in Cleveland who had been locked into old ways of thinking. As he learned—through the love of his church family, who didn't leave him behind but nurtured him to grow along with them—God's way is always a more inclusive way ... a way where all people are welcomed and honored.

What God wants from us in all of this, friends, is to *Live in such a way that those who know us but don't know God, will come to know God because they know us.*

And how do we do this?

1. We do this by not rushing to judgment—on anybody ... by not boxing people in and stereotyping them. We human beings are too complex for that.
2. We do it by not giving anger, or bitterness, or revenge, or jealousy, or condescension—or anything that works against love—too much sway in our spirit.
3. We do it by seeing every human person as an opportunity to know more of God ... remembering that we're all created in God's image.
4. And we do it by living in such a way that God will be revealed in us and thru us.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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