

The Heart of Faith

Luke 6: 27-31

Last week was Valentine's day – our annual celebration of romantic love. This is that aspect of love represented by the Greek word *eros*. These are the intense feelings of love that come with being in love. Neuroscience is indicating these days that the physiology of such intense feelings of love is not located in the feeling part of the brain – not where our emotions generally lie. Rather, *eros* is located in the primal needs part of our brains -- like hunger.

We like to fool ourselves that this aspect of love doesn't belong in church. But obviously it does. Romantic love is often the best form of outreach the church has. How many people come to a particular church as a result of, or in pursuit of, romantic interests? How many people stay because their partner attends?

I'm reminded of something I said in a sermon last year. The focus of romantic love is not erotic – that is, (self-centered and based on what meets my needs and desires). True romantic love is centered and focused on the beloved. *Eros* is the heart of meaningful worship in Spirit-filled community. It is the heart of heroic, altruistic living.

What we celebrate on Valentine's Day actually does have much in common with what we do as church. We are invited and encouraged to fall in love with the Holy, with God – the Deep Mystery of Being itself.

We are continuing today with the theme of living out of our spiritual gifts – especially the prime gift of love. We'll be using a Bible passage we started last Sunday – in the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke -- Luke's setting of Jesus' sermon that corresponds to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke's Jesus articulates the core of his teaching: "Love your enemies." "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Following Jesus consists of the *doing* that comes out of our *being*. That's essentially what we'll talk about in this sermon.

Jesus came down the mountain after sharing a prayer time with his disciples. On a flat piece of ground, he met the crowd. He healed many of them. The crowd of people listened while he taught his disciples to have an attitude of bounty – not being miserly. He tried to help them understand how important it is to receive and give the abundance of the Spirit's resources - our spiritual gifts, talents, time, energy, money, and creativity – to give generously of ourselves. This cycle of receiving with gratitude and giving with generosity is the secret of abundant life.

Jesus then shares what is the heart of our faith.

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously! (*The Message*)

There is different focus for Jesus' teachings in Mark and Matthew, where the instruction to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and give away your coat are intended as forms of assertive, non-violent political resistance. Luke's Jesus seeks to share the secret of how to find abundance in living. "Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior. Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them!"

Think back to the spiritual practice we did earlier in the service. Who is my enemy? What are my enemies? How can I love them? What were your responses?

This past week, I was waiting to pick Kathy up after a rehearsal. She had been ill and it was extremely cold out, so I was keeping the car warm, idling in front of the rehearsal building. Suddenly, there was banging on the driver's side window. Startled, and somewhat unsettled, I turned and rolled the window partially down. I heard a gruff voice saying, "move this thing. I've got to load a harp." The voice sounded very gruff, very challenging. I took the challenge, opened the door and, in my most masculine voice shouted, "You might have asked nicely!" It was not my most macho moment.

There was no response. I moved my car out of way, then followed up by getting out of the car. I stood and glared as the man loaded his wife's harp into the back of their minivan. His wife, who was the harpist in the musical rehearsal inside, stood by looking, to my mind, sheepish. She offered a feeble "thanks" before getting into the car and driving off. I'm not sure the man recognized me, but he looked vaguely familiar.

The next day, I attended an ecumenical worship service in the same community. I walked in and there leading worship stood that man, looking oh so familiar now. He was a fellow minister – a Baptist, I believe. I know I recognized him. I'm not sure he recognized me. A time or two during the service he seemed to glare in my direction, looking uncomfortable. No words were spoken between us. He led us in a unison prayer with these words: "If love is patient, why are we irritable? If love is kind, why are we hostile? If love is not jealous or boastful, why do we flaunt our achievements in the presence of others? God, you have shown love which forgives imperfections; only through your love can we forsake childish ways. Forgive our lack of love and have mercy on us."

I don't know if those words caught in his throat, but they did in mine. His was the face of my enemy for a brief time. It was also the face of my brother. His life was the mirror of my own heart, quick to blame and judge, yet not quick enough to stop myself from rising to the challenge of that kick of adrenaline pushing me to fight or flee. Clearly, a third choice was the obvious one, but in those moments, it wasn't obvious to me.

I want to love my enemy and my enemies, especially to embrace the frightened child inside that responds with anger moving toward violence. My only prayer is "forgive my lack of love."

Who are the enemies today? Are they bin Laden, al-Sadr, Kim Jong-il, and Rafsanjani? Are they George Bush and Dick Cheney? How about Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi? Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson or Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson? Are they nameless oppressors in Africa and Latin America or do they walk the streets of New York and Kansas City? *Yes*, these are the faces some of us consider enemies, and *no*, these are faces we associate with a greater

faceless enemy, a deep systemic evil devouring life and crushing hope in the children of our world.

Sometimes, the faceless enemy looks back from the mirror, and sits numb in the face of rampant evil – somehow unable to see, hear, respond, or even admit the reality that something is terribly wrong – something needs to change. How to how to love such evil? How to love such an enemy within and without?

Love does not condone evil action. Love does not accept passively whatever another does. True love does not abandon hope in the face of a greater evil, but confronts that enemy with truth. It does not demonize the other, but always challenges often with tough love. Love faces the faceless enemy, but still faces brothers and sisters -- still fellow human beings.

True love believes that the work Spirit in this world is not to destroy evil, and those of us who participate in it, but to transform evil into what is good. “Love your enemies.” They are still enemies and we need to love them.

Jesus was deeply rooted in the teachings and tradition of Judaism. He borrows from that tradition words that, in some form, we call the golden rule. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Ask yourself “what do I want people to do for me? Then, grab the initiative and do it for them!” What does that mean for us? First, you have to decide, “what do I want for my life?” Then, you have to decide, how can I initiate the good I want for myself for someone else? How can I initiate the good I want for myself for my enemy?

The choice to live like this is a very personal choice, often a very lonely choice, and always a very powerful choice. The heart of faith through Jesus is the power of one person, *you*, and the power of community, *us*. It is the power of love and reality that we live, move, and have our being in God. The power to transform evil into good lies within each of us because we live in the heart of God. All things are possible. The most horrendous evil can be transformed into the most amazing good.

Today has been designated *Amazing Grace* Sunday. We are remembering a transformation 200 years ago when the institution of slavery was banned in Great Britain and the life of a slave trader named John Newton was transformed. Today, faith communities around the world, comprise of friends and enemies, are singing this song together as an act of hopeful worship.

Racism and slavery are still evils that haunt our world today. What is the task of love in response to these enemies? What do we want for ourselves most passionately that we can work most passionately to provide for another? We face the challenge in partnership with the Spirit to transform evil into good. When we see the face of that enemy with love, we know we are living at the heart of our own faith.

Let's close by saying together a unison prayer. We pray in unison with our friends and especially with our enemies – with and without faces, enemies without and within. God of love, in whose spirit we find our calling to discipleship and service, encounter us in our lives that we may grow in knowledge and actions. Disturb our certainties so we will be open to new insights. Upset our priorities to make room for faith, hope, and love. Expand our horizons to encompass ideas we have not entertained before. Open our hearts to people we have failed to welcome into our midst. Perfect among us that childlike trust that allows change to transform us. Amen.