

## Independence Day Sermon July 5, 2020

One of the enjoyable parts of being a minister who leads worship each week is greeting people at the door after the service has ended. A number of years ago, I was taken aback when a young woman met me at the door on her way out and said, “Why is it you preach the same thing week after week?”

I was surprised and said, “To my knowledge, I have never preached the same sermon more than once.”

“Oh I know,” she said, “the words are different, but the topic is always the same! Love your neighbor, love your family, love yourself, you even said love your enemy! Love, love, love! It’s the same old thing again and again.”

“Ahhhh,” I said, “Now I see what you mean, but I am just quoting Jesus’ words. Afterall, loving one another is the essence of His message!”

She thought for a moment and as she left, she said, “Well, can’t you find something else he said? Because all this loving each other stuff is getting old!”

Jesus did seem to dwell on us loving one another and some of his words do give me pause. This morning’s gospel is one of those difficult passages. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemies.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies.’”

This 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend we celebrate our nation’s independence and the freedoms we enjoy. So it seems a bit odd to me that this particular gospel is the one assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary for us to use. Of all the gospels that are available, this is the one that was chosen to celebrate Independence Day.

“But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’ If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect!”

As if telling us to love our enemies wasn’t enough, Jesus finishes his directive by telling us to be perfect! PERFECT?! Really????! It is helpful for me to know that the word “perfect” in the original Greek means complete. It comes from a primary word which when translated means “to set out for a definite goal.” To be perfect as Jesus uses the word means to strive to be complete just as our Lord is complete. Jesus is saying that all of us should make it our goal in life to love others just as God loves. This does not mean a sappy emotional sentimental kind of love. This understanding of love demonstrates itself in action. The Greek word here for love is agape – “God’s perfect love.” This love is always focused on the greatest good for another. Agape is unconditional, sacrificial, and undeserved. The love that God gives each of us is agape, completely undeserved. There is nothing we can do to earn being loved the way God loves. The very nature and essence of God is love. Everything God does is done in love. We were created in love and for love.

So, why on this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, when we celebrate our freedom, has this gospel been chosen? As followers of Christ we are called to reflect the example He has given to us. As he was dying he prayed, “Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus is imploring us to be like Him. We are reminded that our job is to be healers. In a country that is broken by violence, we are called to pray for those who are contributing to its brokenness.

“Pray,” Jesus says, “for your persecutors.” This is such a simple act and yet it makes a tremendous difference. It doesn’t cost me anything to stop when I am angry and pray for those who seem most undeserving, but most in need of prayer. My heart is changed when I take the time to picture the persons whom I find most distasteful and then ask for God’s greatest good to happen in their lives. When I do this, I find that the chains of anger and fear and hatred that bind me are removed and I find freedom. Our job as followers of Christ is to speak God’s Love and God’s Peace wherever we go. When we do this then we are proclaiming freedom.

Last Sunday we were treated to a wonderful visit by our friends from Windemere, England, Judith and Timothy Bartlett. In her moving homily, Judith clearly laid before us the picture of the heavenly banquet feast where all are welcome at Christ’s table. She pointed out that we will quite likely be seated beside people very different from ourselves because in Christ there is no east or west; in Him no north or south.

One of the benefits of being an ordained clergy person married to another ordained clergy person is that we sit down each week and mull over the appointed lessons to be preached on that coming Sunday. This week my husband cheerfully pointed out to me that “we are very unlikely to enter a room filled only with people with whom we completely agree. We have to learn how to speak respectfully and lovingly with those who think differently, feel differently, and are in fact different from us. This is what freedom looks like.” If we wait until we find someone who thinks exactly the way we do and agrees with everything we believe, we will go through life disappointed. Humans are so complex that rarely do we find anyone who will completely agree with us. We will end up going through life angry and that is no way to live!

As followers of Christ, we have been given a great responsibility. We are commissioned to offer healing wherever we go. We are called to be reconcilers. St Paul articulates this so well in his second epistle to the Christians in Corinth when he says, “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, just as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God!” I love being told I am an ambassador of Christ. When people see me, even people I would regard as a persecutor or an enemy, my commission, my job is to be focused on the task of loving them just as Christ loves, perfectly. I am to pray for their well being and that their hearts will be changed to reflect their Creator the Holy One. When I do so, I will then discover that the chains that hold me captive will fall away and I will truly know what it means to be free.

Amen.