

Pentecost IV

Chief Joseph "Lincoln Hall Speech" ML King "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Mt.5:43-48

St. Mary the Virgin

July 2, 2017

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"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." These are some of the most difficult words in all of the gospels. Yet they offer the key to holding onto our humanity as well as our compassion, especially during times of strife.

In early first century Mediterranean culture, the commandment to love typically meant a deep feeling of attachment or devotion. Loving God with all one's heart meant total attachment. Loving one's neighbors—typically understood as other Israelites--meant to feel attachment to them just as one might for one's own family.¹ This mandate to love helped to forge a sense of people and nationhood, as they were expected to care for one another and each other's well-being.

By contrast, hate meant unattachment, or indifference.² Outsiders generally were regarded as a form of enemy,³ persons to be hated in the sense of complete indifference to them. By the time of early Christianity however, hatred had become more personal, as animosity and persecution were a very real part of early Christian lives.

Love and hate: how easy it is to fall into a way of thinking that is either/or. Jesus was urging his listeners to resist this temptation, by exhorting them to care for the well-being of everyone--insider and outsider, friend and foe. Yet too often we hear this dualistic type of thinking, such as the phrase, "you're either with us or against us." Not only does it cut off what we can learn about a situation, and stifle creativity for a win-win outcome, but it creates solidarity by demonizing anyone who differs. It also can lead to the belief that God is *our* side and supports *whatever* we might wish to do to others. This is the extremism that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking against in his letter written from Birmingham jail. When we see someone as the "other," and dehumanize them as less deserving of basic human rights and dignity than what we ourselves embrace, we are the ones who become dehumanized.

This morning, in our readings, we hear two voices that represent groups who were considered outsiders in the development of our self-understanding of nationhood, not like those who lived among the Israelites and whose well-being was of little concern to them. These voices remind

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p.58. Sherman E. Johnson, "Matthew," *Interpreter's Bible*, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. Vol. VII, New York: Abingdon Press, 1951, p. 302.

² Malina and Rohrbaugh, p.58.

³ Chris Haslam, "Comments," "Matthew 5:38-48", <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr07m.shtml>.

us that July 4 was not a declaration of independence for those who were indigenous to this land, and not for those who had been sold into slavery. The freedom and rights that we embrace would take a long time in coming, and for a sizable sector are still far from complete. As King quoted Abraham Lincoln, “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.”⁴ Nor can a nation of radical inequality endure. An either/or society is bound to fracture. It also goes against what we as Christians envision as the Kingdom.

What inspires our national struggle to be a land of freedom and equality, and keeps us from becoming narrow and vindictive, is our religious foundation to love and to pray for those who differ from us, and even those who harm us. This was crucial for the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King was criticized for being too inclusive, too passive, by those wanting direct action, including violence. But King’s words have been able to be embraced by a wide diversity of people who have heard their own dreams, their own hopes, and their own religious truths echoed in what he expressed. King’s words also have inspired social justice movements around the world, including South Africa.

Across our differences we aspire to certain common values. They are summarized in Chief Joseph’s words, “Treat all persons alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow,” and by Martin Luther King who inspired people across racial divides to stand together for equality and justice grounded in Christ’s love. Much work still needs to be done to assure that everyone, insider and outsider, is treated with basic human dignity and respect, irrespective of citizenship boundaries and privileges. We as Episcopalians are fortunate to have Presiding Bishop Michael Curry pressing us toward racial reconciliation and to be the Jesus movement in the world.

Jesus urges his listeners to be perfect, just as God is perfect. This, I believe, is the antidote to American imperialism and to the bigotry that haunts our national discourse. The word “perfect” in its ancient usage meant complete or whole.⁵ One source has translated it as being “fully human.”⁶ By caring for the well-being of our enemies, even though we may abhor and denounce the injustices they commit, we conform to the divine ideal of completeness, of holding out hope for social change, and perhaps one day reconciliation. The Anglican Church of Canada has been on a long and difficult journey of coming to terms with the pain and injustice done to indigenous and First Nations people through its residential schools, where sexual, physical, and cultural abuse had been rampant. Apologizing for the church’s historical abuse, a partnership between Indigenous peoples and Anglicans has taken steps together to build a

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p.92.

⁵ Perfect comes from the Latin roots *per facere*, meaning to make or do completely. Walter W. Skeat, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Perigee Books, Putnam and Sons, 1980, p. 383. Also see <http://www.dictionary.com/perfect?s=t>. The Greek word *teleos* emphasizes being complete, “Bible Study Tools,” <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/teleo.html>.

⁶ Andrew Prior (2017) “The Grace of Perfection” <https://onemansweb.org/the-grace-of-perfection-matthew-538-48.html>.

future different than the past, one based on mutual respect and affirmation, based on the biblical sense of loving one's neighbor.⁷

Biblical anthropologist Bruce Malina has argued that "God is perfect because God is open to all Israelites, both the good and the bad."⁸ It doesn't mean accepting oppression. It does mean caring enough to take a stand and strive for justice, equality, and human dignity. Loving enemies, then, means following God's example and grounding our conduct foremost in mercy.⁹ Praying for enemies doesn't mean that we ask God to change them to our way of thinking; but it does mean that we begin to see the person a little more fully, perhaps as God might see them.¹⁰

A friend shared with me recently how angry he had been at a colleague in his workplace who had viciously masterminded a campaign to force him out of the organization. It had worked. He moved on to another company but inwardly fumed at the injustice, until one day he realized that it had begun to consume him. He decided to work on letting go of it. He couldn't bring himself to love his former colleague or even pray for him, but he could give him over to God's care without wishing him ill. Soon after he felt his creative energy return. Over time, he found that his view of this former colleague had become more balanced; the injustice wasn't erased but the anger was diminishing. Some years later he heard that this colleague had died, and was surprised at the tenderness toward his family that he had felt. He was able to take a few moments and pray, for his soul and for those who had loved him.

When we struggle with praying for our enemies, the nature of prayer becomes deeper, leading to greater understanding. It also perfects, or completes, our humanity in the face of adversity. This I believe is a profound step toward our healing as a nation, as well as in our personal lives. This morning, for each of us, for whom shall we pray?

⁷ "Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples," *Anglican Church of Canada*. <http://www.anglican.ca/about/ccc/acip/>, cited in Paula Nesbitt, *Indaba!* New York: Church Publishing, 2017, p.194.

⁸ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Revised Edition. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p.173.

⁹ Reginald H. Fuller, "Matthew," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988, p. 958.

¹⁰ Melissa Bane Sevier, "Praying for Enemies," February 13, 2017.

<https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2017/02/13/praying-for-enemies/>