

WGUMC February 24, 2019 “Loving Your Own Worst Enemy”
Luke 6:27-38

What a sense of timing. The lectionary gives us Luke on loving our enemies on the very same weekend that Christians in full battle gear are gathering. The Pope has called his bishops and cardinals to a contentious meeting in Rome while United Methodist clergy and laity have arrived for their slug-fest in Saint Louis.

The Roman Catholic Church is torn apart by a clergy sex scandal that has been going on for decades now and just won't stop. The United Methodist Church may split up because of debates over sexuality that have defied resolution since the 70's. With all the real wars going on in the world, it's heartbreaking to see Christians seeing one another as the enemy.

Into all of this division, Jesus speaks the Word: “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

Before I get to talking about what is going on in the Church, there are three things I want to say about loving our enemies today.

First off, the whole idea strikes me as simply outrageous. Who loves their enemies? Who wants to do good to people who are bad? Come to think of it, outrage is what a lot of folks are feeling these days. There's a new outrage every day, and we operate on angry. We seem to think that anger is our patriotic duty. The bumper sticker says, "If you aren't angry, you aren't paying attention."

And on some days, I agree with that sentiment. But on other days I wonder where all of our outrage is really getting us? We know that it's dangerous to try to keep it all in, but it can be just as dangerous to let it all out. While few of us will make it into the mass shooter category, nevertheless, it's easy to let our anger fall on people who don't really deserve it, who did nothing to cause it and can't do anything about it. The real objects of our anger, the ones who did cause it, are usually far away and oblivious, which makes us even more furious.

So I was thinking: instead of outrage, maybe we could use some "uprage." Instead of projecting our anger outward, why don't we try

lifting it upward? After all, that's what the psalmists did. They poured their anger into prayer and lifted it up to God instead of taking it out on other people. Unlike other people, God can take it. God can even turn it around and make something good out of it.

God took Oliver Brown's anger at his child not being able to attend her neighborhood school in Topeka, Kansas, and turned it into a class action suit that became *Brown vs. Board of Education*, ending school segregation. Likewise, God took Candace Lightner's anger at the drunk driver who killed her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, and turned it into MADD. Mothers Against Drunk Driving is an organization that has managed to raise the minimum drinking age and lower the legal blood alcohol limit and has saved countless lives.

Oliver Brown and Candace Lightner were ordinary people just like us who channeled their outrage into uprage. We, too, can pour our anger into prayer and let God take it from there. If we let God take away some of the hurt and the hate, that will give our love a

chance to grow and, by God's grace, one day it will get big enough to include even our enemy.

The second thing I want to say about loving our enemies is that our efforts won't always lead to a successful Supreme Court Case or legislation that saves lives. In fact, most of the time it will be hard, if not impossible, to measure our success. We often won't know if loving our enemy was worth it and we will seldom win them over to our side.

But that's ok, because I'm here to tell you that love is never wasted. I learned that from high school physics class. The laws of thermodynamics tell us that matter and energy are never wasted. You can't destroy matter. You can't use up energy. All you can do is change them into something else. Love is like that. You can't destroy it. You can only transform it. If you love someone who doesn't love you back, that love isn't wasted. It goes somewhere; it does something, even if you can't see it or know it.

I'm counting on that because we got a postcard in the mail the other day. Someone took exception to the "Black Lives Matter" sign that my activist husband put on the front lawn. So they wrote us:

As black lives matter, so do all other colors [I couldn't agree more]. Your slogan is a slogan of selfishness and continues centuries of white hatred. You want equality. Try treating others as you wish to be treated. Get over your own racism and you'll be treated with respect. If you really care about black lives then do something about the brothers murdering your own. Take responsibility for your own communities [sic] ills and failings.

I read this anonymous note and thought, maybe this is what it feels like to be African American. This gentleman or woman assumes that the people who live at 1604 Collingwood Ave are black and furthermore that we hate people who are white. This person may not be our enemy, but I have a feeling that we are his or hers.

That left me wondering, how can I love someone when I don't know who he or she is? Well, at least I can pray that God will bless this neighbor of mine with an opportunity to meet me and get to know me. Until then, I might order another sign for my yard. I'm thinking about one that says, "Love thy neighbor, no exceptions."

The truth is that even if we put our love on a yard sign, there is no guarantee that it will change our enemy. Yet, if we express our love in some way, through thoughts and prayers or specific actions, then at least we know that love is changing us. Loving our enemy makes us more loving and we will become more like God. Regardless of whether or not our enemy responds, “[Our] reward will be great, and [we] will be children of the Most High; for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

There’s a third thing I want to say about loving our enemies, and that is that it’s awfully easy to feel morally superior to them. It’s tempting to pat ourselves on the back for being such good Christians for loving those bad people. Always, we have to remember what Alexander Solzenhitsyn once said, that “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

This is a profoundly Christian statement. None of us is all good or all evil but a glorious, god-awful mixture of both. Every one of us

is a combination of saint and sinner, hero and coward. We are all part Jesus and part Judas.

I figure that one of the reasons we hate our enemies is because they remind us of the things we hate about ourselves. The speck in their eye makes us so angry because it reminds us of the log in our own. It's no wonder that I get so upset when other Christians tell people how to live, because isn't that what I do for a living?!

St. Paul says that *while we were enemies*, we were reconciled to God, through Jesus Christ. [Rom 5:10] When we begin to understand that God loved us even while we were enemies of God, then it gets easier to love our own enemies.

Loving our enemies means, first and foremost, accepting the fact that God loves us. We can't love anyone else until we know what it's like to be loved not because of our virtues but in spite of our vices. Loving our enemy means loving our harshest critic, doing good to the one who thinks we are bad, and praying for the one who knows best how to abuse us. In other words, it means loving

ourselves. We are our own worst enemy until God loves us into being our own best friend.

I'm afraid that what is true of individual Christians is even more true of the Church. Throughout history, we Christians have been our own worst enemies and, unfortunately, we like to put that on display for the whole world to see. In the 19th century, Methodists went to war with each other, literally, over slavery. For the last forty years, we have been in a legal, theological and personal war over homosexuality. How do we love our enemy when our enemy is us?

This week, I read the words of Jesus about loving our enemies, and I hear God calling us to love the United Methodist Church. My grandparents were Methodist. My parents went to a Methodist college. I went to a Methodist seminary. There I studied all the horrors of Christian history. But I chose not to leave the Church then and I don't want to leave it now.

I know full well that the Church Universal is a very imperfect container for Jesus Christ, but it is a very necessary container for

the followers of Christ. The Church has enough good in it to ground us in grace and give us occasional glimpses of truth. Just as important, it has enough bad in it to give us something to push against and to define ourselves in opposition to. The Church shows us real life examples of righteousness, moral courage and self-sacrifice. It also shows us hypocrisy, cowardice and self-interest.

In other words, the Church is a collection of us. And after it baptizes us, it drives us into the wilderness so we can discover where the growing edges of the gospel are. There, we meet the ones we have not yet learned to love, and we begin to see the shape that God's justice is taking in our lives.

We have to love the Church because Jesus promised that whenever two or three of us scoundrels gather in his name, he is with us. Well, there are 864 scoundrels (delegates) gathered in Saint Louis this weekend, and Jesus is there somewhere, trying to show the woefully imperfect how to keep going on to perfection in love.

I'm not sure when or how we'll get there, but I know who's waiting for us when we do.