

Living in the Ways of Jesus

A Sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

February 11, 2007

Text: Luke 6:27-38

I was one of the lucky ones. I grew up in a great church with very loving and gracious people. They genuinely cared for me and sought my well-being. They taught me the stories of faith. They taught me to love and treat others with respect. They really helped me to catch the spirit of the Christian life.

The trouble for me began in Middle School. I suddenly became the target of a couple of bullies – who would corner me in the morning and ask for my lunch money. And there was always the threat of beating me up if I didn't do as they asked. So I gave them my money. I was afraid – afraid of them, afraid of being hurt, afraid that if I told a school official that somehow these bullies would find out and make it all the worse. And I was most afraid that if I told - no one would know what to do to help me.

I did tell a few people at church – a few trusted leaders. They were very compassionate and empathetic – but of little help. My fear was justified. No one did know how to help. And I understand that better now. As an adult, I have at times been aware of youth who were bullied at school – and I too found myself pretty unsure how to help. I worked with teachers and administrators, but still, the violence continued. The system seemed bigger than me.

So I read this text in light of such an experience. How do we love those who are our enemies? How do we forgive those who have done us wrong? How do we give to those who ask without feeling like a victim?

Ronald Cram is a professor of Christian Education at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, and he has written a book entitled *Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis*. He believes that violence is an act of trying to relate. That indeed, violence is a way of being in relation with others in a misguided and destructive way. (p. 4) He tells this story to help explain.

A few years ago he was working with poor, urban children in Trenton, New Jersey during the summer in a religious education program. He was leading a group of 6-7 year olds in a circle when a 6 year old boy approached the circle. Ronald invited the boy to join the circle, but as he moved to open up a space, the boy balled up his fist and hit Ronald so hard in the chest that it sent him to the floor gasping for breath. He looked up into the eyes of a bewildered child, who then walked away.

In talking to the other leaders later, Ronald learned that the boy had gone up to another teacher and asked – why does Mr. Cram not like me? You see, because Mr. Cram had not struck back, the known pattern of relationship that the boy was familiar with was broken – and the boy was confused. The boy had struck out at the teacher as a way of making some connection.

The boy's actions were not isolated from a larger social context. The boy had moved with his family from Central America to get away from the violence there. Once in the US, his parents did not have the economic or social skills to make an adequate living. His father became depressed, withdrawn, and physically violent. When the father was arrested for trying to break into a local grocery store, the mother and child were left with no prospects for a better life. The layers of social systems that impacted this young boy are almost too hard to imagine.

We are taught violence in our culture. Did you watch the Super Bowl last week? Did you notice how violent the commercials were? We are inundated with images of violence. We are expected to defend ourselves, and often that means striking back. I remember some years ago watching the Andy Griffith show, that all American program that supports traditional values, and when Opie was bullied – much like I was – having his lunch money taken away on the way to school – his dad, the sheriff Andy – finally encouraged him to stand up to the bully and fight back.

I believe we must find a way to protect ourselves from being victims if at all possible. And I believe those of us who are victims of violence in our homes or at school must take actions to get away from the violence. But when I read this text – which is at the core of the gospel – which is the essence of the teachings of Jesus – I have to also ask myself – how can we do that without being violent? How can we do that without doing to the other what they have done to us?

I do not suggest any easy answers. This is not simple. But I will suggest that the text is calling us to take this seriously. To work hard at finding another way. To be a resource to each other – and especially to our children and youth.

When Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he is saying.: do not reciprocate violence for violence. Do not retaliate. Do not mistreat the other even if they have mistreated you. Our behavior – and more importantly our motivation for this behavior – does not come from a place of revenge. It comes from the principal of God's loving us. God is gracious and loving to us – no matter what we have done. We are called to be the same to one another.

The other issue in this text is that we not take on the role of being a victim. It may be true that we are victims, but we are not to act like victims. Instead, we are to use the power of our faith to find another way to respond. We are to ground ourselves in the love of God and embody that love in our living. That is what Martin Luther King did. That is what Rosa Parks did. And so many others.

We have a phrase in this church that we say a lot – that we are living in the ways of Jesus. To live in that way is to embody as fully as possible the love and grace of God. It is not to strike back, not to seek revenge, not to get even.

You remember a few months back when a man broke into an Amish school, holding hostage, terrorizing, and eventually killing some of the children. Do you remember how

the Amish community responded publicly to his violence – they went to the funeral of the man who had been so violent before he killed himself. They set up scholarship funds for his children. They embodied the love of God the best they knew how.

The other side of this text is that we will not treat our friends in a kind and gracious way just because they treat us that way. This one is a bit hard to understand – why not treat them kind and good. Well, that is okay. But we do it – not because they have done it to us – but because it is what God calls us to do in living into the beloved Community of God's realm. Do you see the distinction? We do not support a system of patronage – you do nice things for me, and I will do the same back to you. This is not the old boy network. This is not tit for tat, or cashing in a chip because you owe me a favor. Our lifestyle is not determined by our enemies or our friends. We seek to live in the ways of Jesus, and Jesus points us to a God who is gracious and generous to all.

And that is part of our problem – as Fred Craddock suggests in his commentary on this text. How dare God be generous to people whose behavior does not deserve such generosity? Jesus knew this was hard. Do you remember the story he told of the vineyard workers. Some worked all day, and others only hired on for the last hour. And they all got paid the same. And those who had worked all day complained and whined – this isn't fair. And the owner of the vineyard asks – do you begrudge my generosity? And yes, they did. And so do we. We want life to be fair. We want to get what we deserve – except for when we haven't done much to deserve anything – then we are fine with God being a little generous and gracious towards us. But not towards those we dislike or feel hurt by.

And then there is the story of the Prodigal Son, or the Father and Two Sons. You know the story. The youngest asks for his inheritance, which he takes a squanders in reckless living. And then, he comes to his senses and goes back to ask his father to take him back as a servant. But the father throws a big party to welcome his son home. The problem is with the older brother – who has been dutiful and good. The older brother wants nothing to do with this celebration. It is irresponsible and uncalled for. Look at his brother's behavior. He complains to his father – but his father says – my son who was dead is now alive, my son who was lost has been found.

We don't know what to do with such grace. And we take offense at Jesus asking us to be so gracious to one another. But that is exactly what we who seek to live in the ways of Jesus are called to do.

Now, to be honest, I want to learn to be this loving, this forgiving, this generous. But just learning the stories has not been enough for me. I need more help. I need the imagination of a community that is working together to help me know my options. How can I use the power of my heart when a bully approaches me – how can I do something that does not give in to being a victim? What resources does my faith offer me? And given that violent behavior is so wrapped up in the social systems of our day, is it possible for me to make any difference at all with my faithful stand for love?

The point of the teaching is not that we will change the other person. We may, and that will be well and good. The point though is that we live out of the power of our heart, that we do all we can to increase love and not destroy it, that we build relationship, not tear it down.

As for social structures, it is the work of those living in the ways of Jesus, that is, it is the work of the church, in the words of Sharon Ringe, to create social structures founded in generosity, respect, and equal treatment. And I think this means that this is the core work for us. We must teach another way. We must embody another way. We must learn together over and over for the rest of our lives how to do love so graciously. It is the hardest thing we will ever do. And it is the most important.

This afternoon Harry Knox of the Human Rights Campaign will be in town to lead a conversation about how to work for justice so that gays and lesbians can have the same privileges under the law as do heterosexual couples. This is the work of the church speaking up to systems that bully and discriminate.

This afternoon Christians for United Community will have their big worship service commemorating 4 years of working for racial and economic justice – such as the new work of a living wage, efforts for justice with immigrants, and the support of workers at the Smithfield Packing Plant in Tar Heel, NC. This is the work of the church speaking up to systems to discriminate and bully.

A week ago there was a march on Washington for peace – this is the work of people living in the ways of Jesus.

But we must do more. We must teach our children and youth ways to care for themselves when they encounter the violence at school or wherever. We must teach one another how to stay grounded in love when we are confronted by challenges that evoke in us the desire to be revengeful and hateful. We must work together at living in the ways of Jesus in order to help bring forth God's beloved community on earth.

And we need more people of courage to lead us. In the Jan. 9 edition of the Christian Century, Geiko Muller-Gahrenholz, a German theologian and the author of America's Battle for God, imagines a different response to the tragedy of Sept. 11. He imagines our president saying to the country:

My fellow Americans. We have been hit. The attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon have damaged every one of us. We are filled with anger and rage ... so everything in us cries out for revenge. ... I am sure you would support me if I mobilized our troops to hunt down the terrorists ... But I propose to take another route. It may baffle you, it may infuriate you,... But I ask you to listen with care.

The assaults have shown us something we needed to know ... that we are vulnerable. We are a nation where strangers can come into our country. They can hijack planes and steer them into high rise buildings. Of course, we can improve our security measures. But the

fact of our grave vulnerability remains. We can now empathize with other people who live through civil wars for years and even decades. We can grasp how people feel when their cities have been bombed into heaps of smoking ashes.

So we say to the world – we will try to learn from this bitter lesson. There is no special status for the United States. We will try to understand our part in the injustices that are causing so much suffering in the world. Because we recognize that terrorism is evil, and it will not disappear from the face of the earth because we wish it to go away. It will stay with us as a threat and a temptation because it is in all of us.

Jesus says it over and over again. The way to God is to be loving, to be forgiving, to be generous. Come all who will and we will seek this way of living together. This must be the work of the church in all we do. This is the heart of our life with each other. Only when we do this work will be able to realize God's beloved community. Amen.