



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 3, 2017

“The Toughest Assignment of All”

(Rom. 12:20-21)

Rev. David K. Groth

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20-21).

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Lk. 6:27-28).

Collect: Almighty God, Your Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption. Grant us courage to take up our cross daily and follow Him wherever He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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If you are not startled by these words, if you do not find them disturbing, shocking even, then you haven’t yet heard them. Love your enemies? Do good to those who hate you? Overcome evil with good? That’s not what we do!

Revenge is what comes naturally. Answering hate with hate, responding to violence with violence. In fact, it seems written in our DNA. From the ball field to the battlefield, it’s about revenge. One thing that makes the NFL interesting is to see if the linebacker will target the one who threw a cheap but vicious block. One thing that makes professional baseball interesting is wondering whether the pitcher will beam the batter with whom he has some sort of grievance. Hollywood, for all its political activism against war and violence, keeps making movies about war and violence in service of revenge.

But here comes Jesus with “Love your enemies.” And quick on his heels follows Paul with, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” To put it less elegantly, if someone behaves like a jerk toward you, there’s no reason you have to act like a jerk toward him. In fact, you should be better than that. You can choose to follow God instead of the ways of the world.

For thousands of years we've operated on the bases of retribution. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." It's right there in the Code of Hammurabi, bearing the date of roughly 2,000 years B.C. When wrong is done, a debit appears on the ledger of society. The offender must pay and make amends. So, one example from the Code of Hammurabi: "If a builder builds a house for someone and does not construct it properly and the house which he built falls in and kills its owner, then the builder shall be put to death." (Then follow the variants.) "If the owner's son dies, then the builder's son shall be put to death." "If the owner's daughter dies, then the builder's daughter. . . " "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." It's there, by the way, to restrain us from more severe forms of punishment. The punishment must suit the crime. That is to say, "No more than an eye for eye."

For much of human history, seeking revenge, exacting retribution . . . was something you fantasized about in the heat of anger. But by the time you hatched a plan to paint your neighbors' figs with poison, you typically had cooled off and come back to your senses.

That's not the case anymore. Thanks to the internet and social media, it's faster, easier and nastier than ever. The internet permits us to be impulsive and anonymous. It requires a minimum amount of work; you can ruin someone's life while sitting on the couch watching T.V. There are even websites that cater to electronic revenge.

In our cities, we know that anger plus a hand-gun produces dead people. Complete strangers killing each other because they have some kind of "beef" with the other person, for wearing your baseball cap wrong, or for looking at someone the wrong way. On our highways, we know that road rage with a half-ton pickup produces dead people.

Thinking now on the global scale, in the nuclear age, can we really afford "an eye for and eye" any longer? Engaging in nuclear war to me seems insane and unthinkable, and yet as world leaders hint at it, threaten it, somehow the unthinkable becomes a possibility. Somehow by

threatening it we normalize it, increasing the odds that it could actually happen.

So maybe it's time to listen to Paul when he speaks of not giving ourselves over to evil but overcoming evil with good. Maybe it's time we try to see our enemies as Jesus sees them, as people who are at least capable of good, people who are at least capable of love, as people who know of suffering and sorrow, people who may well be miserable already, so there's really no need to add to their misery.

Jesus said, "Love your enemy." There's something that seems unthinkable and insane about that too, isn't there? But as we talk about it, the unthinkable becomes possible, reasonable, even rational. It's not really that difficult. Paul gives a couple of easy examples. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink." Abraham Lincoln said, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Do you have any enemies? Do you have anyone who would be glad if you just moved away, got sick, or died? Do you have anyone who seems always to be against you, at work, at school, among your extended family? Might I suggest your enemies may not be God's enemies? Might I suggest there's a possibility he even loves those you hate?

"Love your enemies" Jesus said. This is not the kind of love we fall into, delightfully and involuntarily. No, this love is one of the finest words in our vocabulary - Agape - "love which seeks nothing in return." Agapic love is not an emotion so much as it is an action, something you do for another in spite of how you feel about them. Agapic love is an act of the will.

From a Georgia jail cell, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Be glad he didn't say 'like your enemies.'" How can you like someone who hates you? But you can love them. It's the kind of love that finds a way to do something kind for that co-worker who just keeps causing problems. It's the kind of love that helps that neighbor who has never had a kind or grateful word to say. It's the kind of love that patiently listens to the sister-in-law who can speak on no

other topic other than her children. It's the kind of love that finds a way to really listen to and try to understand the one who is your political opposite. How might our lives look if instead of cutting off relationships, we chose to say, "I don't share your conviction on that topic, but I would like to hear more about why this is so important to you." If nothing else, listening well dials down defensiveness and allows for empathy, which moves us in the direction of love.

Agapic love does not mean you have to assume the values or ideas of those with whom you disagree. It does not mean you have to accept their poor behavior. But it does suggest trying to see them as God sees them, not as little devils, but as people made in the image of God, as people worthy of God's love and yours, as people with the potential to be different, to be better, with the potential even to become a brother or sister in Christ.

Does it work? Sometimes. Sometimes when we love the unlovable they turn from their ways, they turn from their hatred, and they become friends.

But also important is what happens to you when you let go of the hatred and the anger.

Jesus taught and we now know that hatred is as harmful to the one who hates as it is to the one who is hated, perhaps more so. Unchecked hatred will just keep eating away at you. Hatred cannot drive out hatred. Only love can do that. Hatred multiplies hatred. Violence multiplies violence. To have an enemy is so time consuming, expensive and life-wasting and exhausting.

So the Bible says when someone hurts you, you don't have to respond with vengeance. There is an alternative. You can show them Christian love. And the promise is not that it will transform your enemy into a nice person. But when you love your enemy, you change. You become more the human being God created you to be, and you become more like the one who created and redeemed you.

The Christian faith, after all, is not about justice being served through revenge. It's about the one who didn't just say these difficult words to love your enemy, but lived

them out. Remember, there was a deep animosity between God and man because of sin. “The sinful mind is hostile to God.” But we believe God took the initiative to fix this, and reconciled the world to himself through Christ.

Remember how he told Peter to put away his sword, for those who live by the sword shall also die by the sword? And then, just to add clarity and to show mercy, he stooped down and picked up the bloody ear of Malchus and healed him? That’s who we follow, one who had mercy even on his enemies. We follow a God who gave up his right to strike back, who restrained his righteous rage, who unclenched his fists, so that nails could be driven through them. We follow a Savior who refused to curse even his crucifiers, but asked the Father instead to forgive them. That’s the one we follow. That’s the one we confess to be God’s Son and our Savior.

There are countless reports of soldiers dying for their friends, for example, of heroes who threw their bodies on top of the grenade. Jesus didn’t do that just for his friends. He did it for his enemies. He did it for you. Paul wrote that God demonstrated his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, still enemies of God, Christ died for us. So instead of clobbering Peter who had forsaken him, Jesus forgave Peter and reinstated him into the ministry. Instead of whacking that Pharisee named Saul, that persecutor of Christians, he made a friend of him, an apostle of the faith and called this new man Paul. Instead of turning his back on his ancient people, on those who insisted on his death, Christ sent his apostles to them first, then later, to the Gentiles. Still today, God has every right to wipe us out, but he chooses to love us instead.

We are here, each of us, under that cross with its outstretched arms; not deserving to be here, not worthy of his body and blood with this bread and wine. We are here because there is one who returned his enemies’ hatred with love.

In effect, he’s saying “It’s your turn now.” If you want to follow me, this is how it works. “Love your enemies.” “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is

thirsty, give him something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Amen.

