The Hard Work of Love

Transfiguration Sunday

Matthew 5:38-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 4But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. . .”

Matthew 5:43-45

Well, here we are on the last Sunday in Epiphany, the Sunday the Church universal designates as Transfiguration Sunday. It is the day when we read of the trek Jesus took up the mountain, accompanied by his closest disciples. As they ascend to the top, a celestial drama plays out before the disciples, as Jesus has an intimate conversation with two of the giants of Jewish history, Moses and Elijah. While this is a passage worth examining, I have chosen instead to continue our own conversation with Jesus, as found in the passage we call the Sermon on the Mount. The part of the Sermon on the Mount we are looking at today is part of the teaching of our Lord some biblical scholars have called *the* *hard sayings of Jesus.* And it’s easy to see why we call them as such. Jesus places demands on his disciples that, frankly, we would rather he kept to himself: “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?”

Hard sayings of Jesus? You betcha. The Jewish audience who held on to the Master’s every word knew precisely about whom Jesus was talking. He did not have to name names. Romans. Those disgusting, evil, cruel Romans. They treat us like dirt, Jesus. You mean we have to love them?

For us the distinctions are not so clear cut. We may think they are, but they’re not. It’s not all black and white.

Let’s look at Jesus’ teaching here in two parts because, in my reading, that’s what Jesus does. The first part deals with how you treat people who have done things that have hurt you. All of us can relate, can’t we. Here’s what Jesus says his followers should do when that happens, in the interpretation by Eugene Peterson in *The Message:* *“Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.”*

We have all, at one time or another, been hurt, wounded, taken advantage of, by another. It may have been done intentionally, sometimes quite innocently. I would dare say there is not one person sitting in this congregation who has not had such an experience. When it happens, we may be tempted to strike back. Others nurse wounds silently, holding on to a grudge. Still others harden our hearts, resolved never to let someone do that to us ever again, that person or any other.

Jesus teaches us in no uncertain terms that those options do not apply to his followers. Now, I don’t hear Jesus saying to us that we should just let people run over us. He does not instruct us to passivity. Far from it. Jesus encourages, no, commands his followers to actively pursue a way of life that he modeled for us. When we go the second mile, we don’t concede to the power of the one who may try to manipulate, take advantage of us. Rather, we are acting out a way of life to which we believe he has called us. They may not see it that way. It does not matter. Others who may be watching may not see it that way. It does not matter. What does matter is that you understand it that way. And the God who sees you, I believe, will be pleased.

The second part of Jesus’ teaching concerns those whom you consider enemies, or who consider you their enemy. Again, in the words of Peterson:

*You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend, and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. God gives God’s best -the sun to warm and the rain to nourish – to everyone, regardless: the good and the bad, the nice and the nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*

*In a word, what I’m saying to you is, grow up. You’re Kin-dom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-given identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.*

Wow. What powerful words. Recently, this piece of teaching came out squarely in the public arena. It is no secret that Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi are not bosom buddies. Not only do they sit on opposite sides of the chasm that has separated Republicans and Democrats, but I don’t think they like each other. He, like the middle school bully that he is, has resorted to calling her names. As far as I know, she has not done the same. At the State of the Union address a few weeks ago, he turned his back on her, refusing her outstretched hand, and she in turn, tore up his speech when he finished, in full view of the camera.

On several occasions, Ms. Pelosi has averred that she prays for the president every day. You may know that Ms. Pelosi grew up in and was raised by strong Roman Catholic parents in Baltimore. In turn, Mr. Trump at a recent prayer breakfast, used the occasion to scorn her, and basically called her a liar for saying she prays for him.

They don’t like each other, that’s plain to see. But I tend to believe her. I may be wrong – I’ve been wrong before – but I think her good Catholic upbringing has taken root in her personal piety.

This way of life, of praying for your enemies, is one of the most difficult personal disciplines I know to practice. I am more tempted to pray that my enemies get their just deserts than to advocate in prayer to God on their behalf. But pray for them I must. If I can be totally candid, I do so in the sure and certain knowledge that praying for my enemies will do no good. But that’s my lack of faith. But even if that is the case, it does not matter that they are changed or not. It is not my calling to change anyone. Other than to be changed myself, that is. And that is what prayer does when I pray for my enemies. It changes me. God can change me as I pray. Piece by brittle piece, my hardened heart is slowly but surely softened. That’s the hard work of love, of loving your enemies: praying for them, and living as transformed persons toward them.

This coming Wednesday, we begin another journey through another Lenten season. I cannot alter the feelings of enmity of those who stand against me. But I can be changed, by the power of God. Prayer can break down the dividing wall of hostility, brick by brick, pebble by pebble, stone by stone. I encourage you to join me. Would you? May it be so.