

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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November 11, 2018
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Romans 12:9-21

Loving Enemies

Many of you are aware that Dan and I just returned from a week in Toronto at the 7th Parliament of the World's Religions. It's called a Parliament, though it has no legislative authority. Rather, it's the world's oldest, largest, and most inclusive interfaith organization and movement, and its mission is interreligious harmony for the purpose of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. The theme of this week was "The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love."

Imagine 7500 people in a huge convention center. They come from all over the world-80 countries were represented. They practice more than 200 different distinct religions or spiritual paths. So they are of many colors and hues, and many wear the clothing which distinguishes their country or their faith. It's a feast for the eyes to try to take it all in.

And even more so for the ears and mind to absorb. We listened to more than a hundred voices sharing their perspectives on the topics of climate change, women's dignity, indigenous wisdom, war and peace, justice and reconciliation, nuclear disarmament, sustainable development, and empowering the next generation. Music and dance and videos added artistic expression to these many, many voices. And through it all, there was a consistent hopefulness and joy. A theme song still echoing in my head says, "Now is a great time to be alive, the world is moving to a brilliant sun, now is a great time for man, woman, child, the greatest moments are still to come."

Yes, it was an exciting week. And such an atmosphere provided a stimulating context for considering Jesus' words,

"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

Along with that command, I also contemplated Paul's words to the Romans, and to us, which frame today's scripture:

"Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor."

And "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The world we all live in is a stimulating context for considering these words. We've just concluded a divisive election season, we've experienced yet another gun violence event, and California residents are fleeing the largest wildfires in the state's history. And today is Armistice Day, Veterans' Day, 100 years to the day since the end of World War I, the war to end all wars. We know that hope didn't happen. When will it?

"Love your enemies." Is this possible?

If you believe the campaign rhetoric we all just endured, the answer is "no." If you are swept up in one of the angry movements of our day, fueled by rage, the answer is "no way." If you harbor a grudge that you are unwilling to relinquish, the answer is "I won't." But "Love your enemies" is Jesus' midrash, that is, his expansion of the command to "Love your neighbor."

And we are here to listen to Jesus. “Love your enemy” means desiring wholeness and peace for the person who is opposed to you, sometimes even opposed to your very existence. So two weeks ago, when the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter arrived at the hospital, still shouting hate-filled words about killing Jews, the Jewish doctors and the Jewish administrator of the hospital responded with the best of medical care. That is a picture of loving one’s enemies.

Love has no boundaries, Jesus tells us. Few of us in this room are faced with such extreme tests of our ability to love as those Jewish doctors. We have few overt enemies. Yet the ability to respond with the kind of love that transcends the boundaries created by hate is cultivated by practicing love towards opponents. Think of political battles, or competition between businesses, or even in sports. When competition devolves into dehumanizing the opponent, or leads to unethical behaviors, the command to love our enemies has been violated. We can do better. Jesus commands us to. Followers of Jesus Christ always want the best for all others, including those on the “other side” of our life’s struggles.

And at the same time, followers of Jesus Christ are enjoined to “hate what is evil.” At first glance, this might seem a contradiction to loving one’s enemies, but enemies and evil are not the same thing.

One of the strong words we heard at the Parliament was the call to nuclear disarmament. Much progress was made in this direction with the end of the Cold War. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev bargained one another down, their successors followed suit, and it looked like the vision of eliminating all nuclear weapons from the earth might become reality. The vast majority of the world’s nations have chosen not to pursue their own nuclear weapons, so they’ve been able to use their resources for peaceful purposes. The possibility of an accidental nuclear war is very real—we’ve come close on numerous occasions. The intentional use of nuclear weapons is an indiscriminate threat to innocent people. Nuclear weapons are evil, no matter who owns them. There is no justification for their use, and their mere existence poses a danger to the entire world.

Yet we have become complacent, and our complacency is providing an opening for the re-escalation of the nuclear arms race. This week, a bipartisan coalition of national security professionals felt the urgency of the situation merited sending an urgent message to the president regarding the need for strong agreements between the U.S. and Russia to limit nuclear arsenals. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/world/europe/trump-russia-arms-treaty.html>) The writers of this letter are people who devoted their careers to this work. One of the signers is former secretary of state and secretary of defense George P. Shultz. I was reminded this week of his daily prayer, which I’ve shared before from this pulpit.

Dear God, please bring common sense and divine guidance to our work on the problems that nuclear weapons pose to our world. Man has invented a means to destroy us all. We must eliminate these weapons in order to preserve a sane and peaceful world. We pray for your help as we work toward this goal.

(<http://www.uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/voices-world-free-nuclear-weapons>)

George Shultz will be 98 years old next month. Younger generations need to take up this prayer, and turn it into action, living the biblical words: “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9. 17. 21)

My friends, we can love our enemies and hate what is evil at the same time. We can hold fast to what is good and put our trust in God, we can pray and we can live into the intentions of our prayers. The Christian ethic given by Christ and explained by Paul is ours to live in the complex 21st century world in which we find ourselves. We can't accept God's grace and then have our fingers crossed behind our back when we pledge to live Christ's way.

But now is a great time to be alive! For there are countless ways for us to live Christ's commands, love our enemies, and use the lens of faith to discern evil so that we might hold onto what is good. Love, Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us, "is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

Maybe we have been told that those of other religions are our enemies. Maybe we are living as if that is the case. That kind of living leads to religiously-fomented violence. But now is a great time to be alive, for today we have so many opportunities to encounter and love those who practice other religions. Other faiths are not devoid of truth, and from their followers we can also receive love.

We also have been told that other nations are our enemies. Are we are living with this assumption? This kind of living can lead to absurd decisions, such as building up a nuclear arsenal which will destroy us all. But now is a great time to be alive, because today we can name the absurdity of evil and work with others to eliminate these offenses to all God's creation. We learn love as we risk love.

And aren't we also being told that people of other skin colors or languages are our enemies? Living as if that is true, we become so fearful of poor immigrants and refugees that we won't hear their stories and work together to eliminate their reasons for leaving their homelands. But now is a great time to be alive, to answer the challenges of the world's suffering because we believe in a God who loves all the world and all its creatures, a God whose face we recognize in suffering humanity because Jesus, our Savior, died on a cross.

Now is a great time to be alive, to be able to take in the world's wonder and diversity and know that it is all precious to our Maker. Now is our time to make peace-it's 100 years overdue, but it's not too late. For now is our time to learn and live God's love.

Together.