



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
2-19-17

How do we get enemies? Or have people who persecute us? How does that happen to us? Especially in light of this reading that assures us that God surrounds, is present with, and is available to all of creation. God blesses all. Then Jesus asks us to love all – every single each other, all of each other. If we would be a disciple of Jesus we must love everyone. How then could we have enemies?

There was a Sunday School teacher was telling a story about Jesus and held up a picture of Jesus found in the book. But, she told the class, no one knows what Jesus really looked like. A little girl studied the picture for awhile and declared, “But you have to admit – you sure can see the family resemblance.” The family resemblance!

That’s what you and I have – the family resemblance to Jesus. There is a line in the Wyoming Eucharistic Prayer that speaks of seeing God’s greatest gift reflected in each others’ faces. In our current Eucharistic Prayer we hear, “You formed us in your own image and called us to dwell in your infinite love. But we failed to honor your image in one another and in ourselves, we could not see your goodness in those around us...so we violated your creation, abused one another, and rejected your love.” We do not see God’s goodness in one another. We fail to see the image of God in all of creation. That may be the answer – to look into each other’s faces and see God’s creation looking back at us. Seeing God looking at us should inspire us to feel love and be loving.

I find those are both beautiful and tough words to hear...we are formed in God’s image yet we hurt each other. Listening to today’s gospel reading we hear about people who harm each other and we hear ways to handle that treatment. All that Jesus instructs us in this writing is how to live counter-culturally, how to stand firm in the loving image we were created to be.

As a disciple of Jesus we are told to resist an evildoer – the better translation for resist is to not use violence with an evildoer –but live actions of grace and holiness and dignity. When Jesus talks about being struck on the right cheek – there is a cultural statement there. The left hand was considered unclean – so striking someone on the right cheek would be done with the right hand and that would make it a back-handed stroke. Then when you turn to give them your left cheek- you are showing your dignity in standing upright and not lessening your stance of who you are. And if someone wishes to strip you of your clothes – walk about nude and let the embarrassment rest on the one who takes your clothing. A common practice for Roman soldiers was to conscript people to carry their gear for them for a mile, but if you go two miles you

demonstrate that you are not cowed or fearful of their perceived power. You have the firmness to continue onward on your own for another mile. No one can remove from us the choice and the power to behave with a strength born of love.

All of these teachings of Jesus encourage us to embrace our worthiness – not bowing down to unkind or demands from those who think they have more power than us. No, instead we pray for everyone and accept that even those we might view as our enemies still receive the same love as we do, are created by the same God as we are, and all lives are surrounded by this God. So, we extend ourselves to get to know those others created in God's image. We greet them, we pray for them, we learn to love them.

And in living this way we mature into the fullness of who we were created to be. Again, a deeper understanding of the word perfect used in this reading, the word teleios – is complete. Grow to become a complete human being, mature into the fullness of accepting ourself as the image of God to accept and know our holiness, our worthiness, our freedom.

I believe Jesus is teaching us, asking us to never let anyone take the freedom we have in the Lord – that we are to act from the freedom of love. That is a love that is non-violent, refusing to be vindictive, refusing to separate ourselves out from each other, allowing us to become ever more humane as we pray for those who persecute us.

Martin Luther King Jr. said “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

And St. Augustine of Hippo was fond of saying at communion, “receive who you are” and “go become what you have received.”

We receive the Body of Christ and we live as the Body of Christ because we share in the same family resemblance to the image of God.

Thanks be to God.