

Lectionary A February 19, 2017 7th Sunday after Epiphany
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana
Pastor Roberta Meyer
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Psalm 119:33-40
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

The Raw Truth

...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. This is from our Leviticus reading today.

At least ten times we can find these exact words in the Bible. That is what Jesus was all about, loving our neighbor. And Jesus showed us that our neighbor was anyone we meet alone the side of the road. And anyone hungry, and in prison, and who were sad, and ostracized by others. And today, Jesus gave these words an even harder punch. *"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..."*

The relatives of people slain inside the historic African American church in Charleston, S.C., by Dylann Roof spoke to him at his court appearance.

[They] did not turn to anger. Instead, they offered him forgiveness and said they were praying for his soul, even as they described the pain of their losses.

"I forgive you," Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul."

"I acknowledge that I am very angry," said the sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor. "But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family ... is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul."

Wanda Simmons, granddaughter of Daniel Simmons, said that the pleas for Roof's soul were proof that "hate won't win."

We've heard Jesus' words about loving our enemies, we recite the verses, and sing songs about it, but when we read stories like this, I don't know about you, but I have a hard time wrapping my mind around that love my enemy stuff.

In 1957 Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a sermon entitled, "Love Your Enemies" at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama. In 1957 I was a little girl growing up in a rural town in Central Indiana.

In 1957 Dr. King was teaching about loving your enemies. He said, *"this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and*

our civilization, love even for enemies.” He acknowledged how hard this command from Jesus seems to us. He admitted that it seems nigh on to impossible to do. But he didn’t back off. He said, “. Because Jesus wasn’t playing; because he was serious. We have the Christian and moral responsibility to seek to discover the meaning of these words, and to discover how we can live out this command, and why we should live by this command.”

In 1957 as a little white girl in Indiana, I had no contact with anyone who wasn’t the same shade of pale as me. I need to tell you, I’m going to be downright honest, to the point of stating the raw truth about being that little girl in central Indiana. While Dr. King was teaching about loving your enemies, I was being taught childhood rhymes and chants with a very offensive racist word in them. I didn’t know it was a bad word. We even went to the local candy store and bought candy with that horrible word in its name.

In 1957 Dr. King listed the reasons we should love our enemies. The first reason is, *“that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe.”* He told a story about road rage. About how he and his brother were driving down a road one night and they came up to a car coming at them with its brights on. The driver refused to dim the lights, so Dr. King’s brother who was driving decided he’d turn on his brights as the car came closer, just to “show him!” Martin stopped his brother. He said, *“And I looked at him right quick and said: “Oh no, don’t do that. There’d be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody got to have some sense on this highway.”*

Dr. King explained. *“Somebody must have sense enough to dim the lights, and that is the trouble, isn’t it? That as all of the civilizations of the world move up the highway of history, so many civilizations, having looked at other civilizations that refused to dim the lights, and they decided to refuse to dim theirs.”* The result is destruction. In this sermon about loving your enemies Dr. King stressed, *“Men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love*

In 1957 when Dr. King was teaching that hate made more hate, I can’t say I was being taught to hate people different than myself, but I was taught to be afraid of them. If we were walking down the street, and someone who didn’t look like us came our way, I felt my mother’s hand squeeze mine tightly and lead me as far from them as possible. “Don’t look them in the eye. Look away,” she’d say. She’d explain her actions with a quote she used all the time. *“Birds of a feather flock together.”* I got the message that those people weren’t my kind of feather. Maybe I was being taught to hate.

George Washington Carver said, *“Fear of something is at the root of hate for others and hate within will eventually destroy the hater. Keep your thoughts free from hate, and you need have no fear from those who hate you.”*

That brings us to the second reason Dr. King said we should love our enemies in that 1957 sermon. He said, *“and that is because hate distorts the personality of the hater.”* I think that is what is going on too much in the world today. All you need to do is read comments on

Facebook from people on both political parties. It is plain ugly. Hate is not healthy. When I feel even a little inkling of hate creep into my being, it changes my demeanor. And in the last several weeks and months I don't like admitting that is what began to happen to me. I don't like that feeling. Like Dr. King said, *"Hate at any point is a cancer that gnaws away at the very vital center of your life and your existence. It is like eroding acid that eats away the best and the objective center of your life. So, Jesus says love, because hate destroys the hater as well as the hated."*

The third reason Dr. King said we should love our enemies is this: *"that love has within it a redemptive power.... That's why Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption."*

Last Sunday I went to a dinner with a group here in Evansville called "Women In Faith." There were over 20 women who met in one woman's home. Women of every faith possible, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus. We listened to the fear the Muslim women live with nowadays. "One woman told a story about walking in Wesselman Park. A man walked up to her and asked when she was going to leave this country. Her reaction was wonderful. She politely said, "Well, I've live here my whole life. I wonder, why did you ask me that question? Is that something you are asked often?" He was speechless. If she had responded with a hateful answer, he'd probably keep abusing her. But her nondefensive response changed his demeanor. Love changes us.

Jesus said, *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven"* Being children of our Father in heaven is being love to the world. That is the message for today.

In 1968, the year when Dr. King was assassinated, I was in college. I went home one weekend and told my mother I had a crush on a guy I worked with at the Student Union. He happened to be black. Oh, my goodness. Mom reacted, not by yelling at me, she was too smart for that, but out came that old quote about birds and their feathers.

You see, I'm realizing something now that gives me the chills. This is the raw truth. In 1957 when Dr. King was teaching about loving your enemy—I was being brought up to be the enemy.

What happened? What changed me? The only answer is Jesus. On a tree on a hill so long ago, Jesus' love pours out on all of us making us God's children. Loving our enemy is our destiny. And Jesus will not stop loving until our destiny comes completely true. Thanks be to God. Amen.