

Advent Lutheran 2/19/17

“Standing in the Tragic Gap”

“you have heard 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 sons and daughters of your Father and Mother in heaven; for they make their sun shine on the evil and the good, and send their rain on the righteous and the unrighteous....Be therefore perfect, as your Heavenly Father and Mother are perfect.”

I don't know how you are feeling these days, for me there is a deep sense of forboding, It's as though a dark cloud has settled over our country. Something deeply disturbing is happening! Words seem to have lost their capacity to convey meanings we all can recognize. Assumed ways of operating in conducting governance and public life seem to have been swept away almost overnight, apparently while we were sleeping. With each passing day, my concern has grown regarding the future of our country. I realize I may be guilty of exaggerating, and I want say, I hope with all my heart that I am exaggerating!

This week the Capitol Times featured an interview with Parker Palmer in which he described how he saw his own situation as a person of faith. I realized he was expressing far more clearly than I could, exactly what I was feeling. He described himself as “standing in a tragic gap.”

On the one side of the gap are the harsh realities of our violent, and hate filled world, a world about which we may not have a whole lot to say! But, on the other side of the gap we have what we know to be possible, not because we wish it to be so, but because we have actually seen it! We have seen a whole procession of people who have lit the way for us, living lives of amazing courage, compassion and commitment to pursue mercy and justice,

Some are famous, like Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Vaclaw Havel and Martin Luther King Jr. Others less well known, like the Amish families that came in their buggies to comfort the parents of that disturbed young man who had murdered so many of their children. Or the members of Mother Emmanuel Church who found it in their hearts to forgive the young man who responded to their hospitality with such terrible violence.

Parker Palmer reminds us the work of these Saints is not complete. They have left to us a huge, urgent uncompleted mission!.

In 1994, in the span of 100 days in Rwanda, nearly one million people, many women and children, died in a terrible genocide that pitted Tutsi and Hutu neighbors against each other. What kind of future would that country have in the wake of that bloody conflict? Two months ago, Laura Hermann, a Young Adult in Mission volunteer of the ELCA came home from Rwanda. She wrote about what she had seen in Rwanda. It is an inspiring, almost unbelievable story!

“Where you would think there might be revenge, you see instead whole neighborhoods of homes being built by genocide perpetrators for genocide survivors. Where you might there might be continuing violence you see instead organizations and churches fostering dialogue between killers, victims and their families. Keep looking and you will see Peace clubs in high schools and universities. You will see coffee, dairy and even flower growing cooperatives that bring both groups together through business and agriculture. You will hear that instead of identifying themselves with a certain group, people will say proudly, “Ndi Umuryarwanda” I am Rwandan!

It is a story that shows us too, the amazing capacity of humans to forgive. It shows us that even when a country has stooped to its lowest level, it can still choose another way. It shows us that love can overcome hate, but that takes a conscious decision and daily action!

I needed to hear about Laura Hermann discovered in Rwanda, to keep alive the flame of hope for people of faith standing in that “tragic gap” of which Parker Palmer wrote. That gap is tragic, Parker tells us because there are things that can’t be repaired, realities that will always be with us. So that gap is never completely closed.

So he asks himself and asks us, how do you sustain yourself when you find yourself in that tragic gap? How do you live your life, because life goes on, no matter what the challenges or circumstances? Parker has some thoughts about what has proven helpful to him in sustaining hope in dark times. First he reminds himself that this is not the first time these kind of challenges have faced us, and our nation has survived. He also came to understand it was important for him to act even if it is in some small way. He and his wife have joined Open Doors for

Refugees, a local Madison group trying to help refugees. He writes, "If I can act on my concerns, I think that is ultimately the best kind of therapy."

He also stressed the importance of taking the risk to open yourself to dialogue with people that may have different experiences from your own, "You need to truly listen even to your enemy. "When has talking about someone not in the room ever accomplished anything!" Reach out to those you think of as enemies, engaging them in serious civil discourse. It is also important to Pray for them and to pray for your own change of heart.

In that spirit, this morning, we bring that question to Jesus. We should be warned, he will not give us any easy answers! He will probably leave us with deeper and more painful questions than we had before!

When you hear those words, "You have heard it said of old," "but I say to you" you know right away, you are being challenged by Jesus to give up what you thought was rational behavior, in order to struggle, not with the difficult, but with the impossible!

Of all the things Jesus said and did, the most radical was his command to LOVE YOUR ENEMY! Love your enemy! Why on earth would we do that? It's the last thing you and I would be inclined to do? Particularly when the enemy is not some generalized menace, but someone we know, someone who not only could harm us, but actually has become for us a cross we have been forced to bear.

Why on earth would we do that? Some Preachers have gone to great length to explain how turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving up your cloak, is really a prudent strategy designed to shame and disarm your enemy, "killing him with kindness, so to speak!"

That view has even crept into the New Testament. Paul writes in Romans 12, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for by so doing, you will heap coals of fire on his head." How did that verse ever make it into Scripture? What a terrible reason for doing something good to your enemy! Something seems to be missing here in our translation or our understanding, or in Paul's understanding of the message of Jesus.

Of course, kindness is sometimes effective in changing the attitude and behavior of an enemy, but Jesus makes no promises about achieving that result. And, in any

case, that does not appear to be the main motive Jesus offers for this hard challenge to love your enemy. What follows in our Gospel is one of my favorite verses in the whole New Testament. Jesus teaches us, “

Love your enemy, so that you may be children of your Father and Mother in heaven, for they cause their sun to shine on the evil and the good and send their rain on the fields of the righteous and the unrighteous,”

The appeal is not to the Will of God, “Do this because I command it, but rather to the Nature of God. Jesus is telling us, it is the nature, the unbreakable habit of God to be gracious! For many years, I heard Jesus words as an impossible demand which left me with a huge burden of guilt. With the passage of years, and a lot of thought and prayer, I’ve come to hear a different message. Now I hear Jesus telling me that when I share his love even in small ways, I enter into the joy and freedom of being a child of God. When we love even our enemy, we participate in God’s program of blessing the human family and the nurturing of creation. And at the same time we reflect God’s unconditional love for all people!

I’d like to return to the question of “Who is this enemy that I am being called to love?” My first reaction is wonder if I have any real enemies, I mean, people that are out to get me? I’ve never been struck in the cheek, except as a small boy when, in my innocence, I made the mistake of giving my mother “The Finger”. Without thinking it about it, She slapped me pretty hard, but was instantly regretful for what she had done and she treated me very well for some time after the incident. For that reason, she never had a chance to become my real enemy.

For those who are curious, so far as I know, I’ve never given the finger to anyone else, although these days I’m sorely tempted!

But, to get back to my question, to gain a broader perspective on “who is my enemy,” I need to go back to those earlier words of Jesus. What we have come to call, “The Great Commandment”: “You shall love your God with all your heart and soul and mind, AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” This suggests to me that, what happens to my Muslim, Latino and Afro/American neighbors, happens also to me! When they are being threatened and persecuted, that is also happening to me and to all of us, in this family of faith. Their enemy becomes my enemy. This means I need share their pain and stand with them and offer what help and protection I can.

This past week I read a statement by Hussein Rashid a representative of the Muslim American community, entitled, "What Muslims need from Christians." I'm sure the same thoughts could apply to our Latino neighbors. He writes, "In this moment, Muslims need more than Christian allies, we need protection in the name of Jesus. What I want to hear this clear clarion call: Jesus demands Christians to stand with those who have no other protector. I need to see Jesus love embodied in the world. I need to see, not just hear, Christians saying, "not in my name!" Not in the name of Jesus!

We see a lot of media coverage these days on issues of crowd size, voter fraud, administrative skill or lack thereof, possible political entanglements with Russia, but almost no attention is being paid to the corrosive effect on the social fabric of our country because of the false accusations being leveled against our Muslim, Latino and Afro American brothers and sisters.

I'm not a trained sociologist nor am I an expert in statistical research, but I do read Pew Research data and serious journal articles about the patterns of behavior in our society. Some questions I have been asking:

Are there serious crimes being committed by Immigrants? Yes, some of them violent, but studies show crime rates among Immigrants are actually lower than in the general populations. Maybe we should be more worried about Norwegians!

Do immigrants benefit from the social network? Yes, but only in very modest ways. And contrary to what you may have heard, they do pay taxes, while being denied many benefits other tax payers enjoy. Studies show immigrants add far more to the economy of our communities than they take from them. As most of you know, major swaths of our economy depend on the contributions of the immigrant workforce, Wisconsin's dairy industry would be in dire straits without the presence of Latino workers.

We hear a lot about "keeping America safe" and, on the surface, that appears to be a worthy goal, but how can we be safe when we exist in the middle of a deeply troubled world, especially if our priority is not focused on making our contribution to alleviating those troubles. Is "America First" a viable recipe for creating a more stable world?

Does the Muslim American community constitute a threat to our security? Here I can become really dogmatic! Absolutely not! A few facts from the Pew Research Organization. Muslim Americans, compared to the broader population of America, are on average, better educated, more prosperous, more law-abiding and, among the minority groups they are among the best adjusted to the American way of life. More than 80% express deep gratitude for being able to make their home here. Even more interesting, it is estimated, 75% of the tips leading to prevention of violent acts, come from the Muslim community itself! Does that sound like a group, you want to turn into your enemy?

By now, you may be asking, how did David Keese-Berg get off on this political rant? I thought this sermon was about loving your enemy. I confess I was once described as a "sheep in wolves clothing." That really hurt! Well it just goes to show how difficult it is, at least for me, to follow the command of Jesus, particularly when I'm really upset and angry.

My one modest defense, is to argue, as a parent that, when your son or daughter is standing in front of you telling bald faced lies to justify outrageous, and dangerous conduct, it's not an expression of love to let them get away with it!

More than anything else, being a follower of Jesus is about setting our feet on the Jesus path, the path of love. But, let be clear about it, setting our feet on the path of love can be a hard business! Ask any mother, from pregnancy to delivery, to dirty diapers and sleepless nights, living through teenage rebellion and battles over boyfriends, dates and homework. Love demands a heroism and selflessness that can last for decades.

The same is true for marriage, "For better and for worse, in sickness and health, for rich or for poor," tells us that love demands toughness, resiliency, determination and a willingness to forgive, that lasts a lifetime! A congregation is a demanding kind of marriage that requires those same gifts!

The challenge to follow Jesus example of radical love and hospitality calls for total commitment. We will fail, get knocked down and then have find a way to get up off our knees and try again. That takes faith and trust. When we are hurt, we can respond by praying for God to crush our enemies or we can pray, "Lord make me an instrument of your peace.

I'm old enough to remember the civil rights movement and I remember being inspired by the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

"I've seen too much hate myself to hate in return. Hate is too a heavy burden to carry. We want to be able to stand up and say in the name of Jesus, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. Do what you will; we will still claim the freedom to love you. We will one day wear you down and win freedom and dignity for you as well as for us."

I close with the eloquent prayer of another Christian brother, Nicolai Velimerovich, a Christian martyr from Russia. "Bless my enemies O Lord. I bless them and do not curse them, for they have driven me into your arms more surely than even my friends. I have found my home in your tabernacle, where neither friend nor enemy can harm my soul nor separate me from your love, Amen

That's the Jesus path, and that tabernacle of love, is the place where I want to be, but, Lord Jesus forgive me, I'm 84 years old, I've seen a lot over those years. but measured on that path of love, I'm still a long, long ways from home!