

## Holy Cross – July 3, 2016 – The Rev. Jamie S. Samilio

- Deuteronomy 10:17-21
- Hebrews 11:8-16
- Matthew 5:43-48
- Psalm 145 or 145:1-9

The Gospel from Matthew today is part of the Sermon on the Mount that starts with the Beatitudes, and then runs through a list of things that Jesus clarifies for the people. A course correction as it were, to what had become the social norms of the day. Following the Beatitudes, the topics Jesus covers include: Fulfillment of the law; Murder and Anger; Adultery; Divorce; Swearing of Oaths; an Eye for an Eye (the turn the other cheek lesson); and finally today's verses on Loving our Enemies.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."* This is a pretty tall order, to love your enemy. Something I learned as a child helped me frame this more clearly. I learned that you can love someone, and not like what they do.

God's love is a gift. Love is too wonderful to keep to ourselves, and that means seeing each other as God's loved ones too. Although God's love is without conditions, it is not without consequences: God commands us to love one another as God has loved us. Because God lives in us, we embody God's love for the world. God's love is incarnate in us.

You can love someone, and not like what they do. Just because you love someone does not mean that you are required to agree with them, nor tolerate their behavior. But, the actions you take, must be taken out of love.

God's playing field is level. The sun rises and sets on the good and on the evil. He sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. God is not the one who makes distinctions between God's children. It is us who posture for position, asking who shall sit on the right or on the left. People see "OTHERS" – those unlike themselves, and we compare ourselves, and we place values on "others" instead of simply loving them.

Simply loving everyone, means we love each OTHER, all inclusive, everyone. Not love laden with conditions, I will love you if...insert here whatever makes you comfortable, secure and happy. I will love you if? Love with conditions, is not love, it is bargaining and rationalization, and quickly lead us to say the words, "They do not deserve my love."

Brene Brown, said in a recent post: "Love is beautiful when it's professed, but it's only meaningful when it's practiced."

Where do we begin to learn to love? The best advice I heard lately was *"The best way to help yourself, is to put your arm around someone who needs it more than you do."* Many times I have heard people ask, *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* And I think the answer we are afraid to express is, "Yes, I am." Yes, I am responsible to stand up, and to stand for my brothers and sisters. That is a response from a position of love, pure and simple.

I am not immune from anger, grief, pride, envy, you know the list, and I know that I can only control myself, my thoughts, my words, and my actions. If I have any hope of loving people who are hard to love, I have to begin with myself, and then I need to stand for the "other."

We are blessed to live in the United States, and enjoy the freedom that we have and celebrate this weekend. Our freedom was not free however, it was won through the resolve, actions, and lives of brave and faithful people, who acted out of love for each other and their home.

We are a nation in a growing global economy, where our interdependence on “others” is becoming intertwined with ours more and more everyday. If we are to move forward as a nation, We need to have love and tolerance with and for each other, and we need to stand, with and for each other in our words, and in our actions. We need to re-write our social norms, we need to pay attention to what we say and what we do – because what we do, matters.

Jesus’ fundamental point in the Gospel, is that only people who place their confidence entirely in God, can learn to renounce their own security, and encounter their neighbors openly. Trusting God allows us to re-write our social norms. When we encounter others with God’s love in our hearts, we no longer need to kill in order to live, to worry that the truth is being spoken, to seek revenge, to have our day in court, or to vilify each other.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in Hitler’s Germany who initially supported Hitler, until it became clear what was intended. Martin became an outspoken clergy person, and was himself thrown into a prison camp.

Martin was interviewed about his words from a famous poem he wrote, and how he came to say them. I want to share a little of what is known of his original speech, and his interview with you.

Some of you may know this poem.

*“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”*

Martin often changed the groups in his poem, but in all versions, the impact is made by beginning with a small group with the least impact on the society, and stepping up, to the largest group, and then finally to himself -- an outspoken critic of Nazism. He was a member of a clergy group that spoke out against the imprisonments, and wrote publically against discrimination.

In one version of a translation of the text from his speech, Martin was clear in his words stating of the groups being imprisoned, "who cares about them." We thought: Communists, those opponents of religion, those enemies of Christians - "should I be my brother's keeper?"

Then Martin, said that the newspapers reported the imprisonments, but said this, “...The communists, we still let that happen calmly, and the trade unions, we also let that happen; and we even let the Social Democrats happen. All of that was not our affair. The Church did not concern itself with politics at all at that time, and it shouldn't have anything do with them either.

It was when they got rid of the sick, the so-called incurables the tide changed. Martin recalled a conversation with a person who claimed to be a Christian. The man said: Perhaps it's right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money, they are just a burden to themselves and to others. Isn't it best for all concerned if they are taken out of the middle of society? Only then did the church as such take note. Then we started talking, until our voices were again silenced in public. Martin asked, "Can we say, we aren't guilty/responsible?"

You can love someone, and not like what they do, and you are not required to agree with them, nor tolerate their behavior. Many people ask how the German people could have allowed such hate to grow in their country, we may ask this of ourselves as well.

If Martin re-wrote his poem for us today, it might sound something like this:

First they came for the Blacks, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Black.

Then they came for the Muslims, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Muslim.

Then they came for the LGBT community, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a member of the LGBT community.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We must speak for each other. We must stand for and with each other.

What are the things that keep me from loving other people? Are those things motivated by fear? Are they excuses? Jesus did not say you had to like people, or even agree with them, he said you had to love them.

So many questions, from a Gospel that simply tells us to love each other.

I wish I had the answers. I wish I had a place to start and fix the world, but I do not. I cannot control other people. I can only control my own words and actions. What we can do as a church, begins with conversations, with each other, but we must also find a way, to show others love.

William Sloane Coffin -- A Presbyterian minister and a peace leader in the 1960-70s once said: "The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear." And "Perfect love casts out fear"

Many years ago, in Bedford, UK – there were many immigrants from the Caribbean came to work and send money to their families back home. Tensions were high, and sentiments were anti-black, and anti-immigration. An influential woman, wealthy and well known, was against immigration. She was disgusted by the cultural shifts and the impact the immigrants were having on her town. Woman got in her car and drove to the court for a town hall meeting on the immigration issue. She spoke passionately about her town, her home, her traditions, and the horrible influx of foreigners bringing about all manner of unwanted change and upsetting the cultural balance.

When the meeting was over, as is typical of a town south of London, fog had set in. A deep, thick fog, the kind where your hand in front of your face can disappear. As she walked back to the car from town hall – she was disoriented and could not find the car. She walked toward a streetlight to read the road sign and re-orient herself toward her car.

Just as she was reading the sign, a man grabbed her from behind and held her tightly. He was a 6'5" tall black man, and he held her firmly until the woman begged him, "Please let me go." He released her and stepped back. The woman saw that the man was crying. He said I am lost, I am afraid, I have never seen weather like this, I do not know where I am. I am staying in a hostile until I can find better housing, and I have only been here for a week. I came for a new life and to send money to my family, please help me. I have never seen weather such as this, and I can't find my way home. She put him in the car and drove him to the hostile.

Before he got out of the car, he said, I prayed to God to send me an angel, and when I looked up, I saw you under the light, and knew it was you that God sent to me, you were my angel. It took her half her life to realize HE was the angel to her.

Who was the angel? We need to love one another. We are God's gifts to each other. If we take the time to look, we see Christ in each other.

Love overcomes fear. Loving our enemies does not require us to prepare for the task, we just need to do it. Perhaps if we stop being so afraid of each other, we will not need to be so afraid for each other.

*"Perfect love casts out fear." "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* God's love makes divine love real and visible, in the ordinary lives of ordinary people. We are the hands and feet of Christ in this world – and what we do, matters. **AMEN**