

Sermon for August 31, 2008
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Romans 12:19-21, Mt. 16:21-26

This is a kind of back to school sermon – a review as we prepare for a new program and Sunday School year at St. John’s, a review of the basics of Christian living. These basics are not obscure, and they’re not doctrinaire. They are not things to figure out or grasp intellectually. They are things to do and ways to treat each other – ABC’s, if you will, of being fully human and alive, with some XYZ’s included as well. These basics are for all people – they are not unique to Christians or even to religious people of other faiths. You don’t need to be religious to embrace these basics. We have guidance here for living that anyone can try to follow, but for us today, this guidance comes from St. Paul in his letter to the church in Rome and from Jesus’ difficult metaphor about taking up one’s cross – Christian scriptural packaging for how to lead a truly good life.

I’ll start with the ABC’s – the easy part, or the part that is easy to accept, if not to do. Paul takes the basic core teaching of Jesus – to love our neighbors as ourselves – and outlines the kinds of behavior that are truly loving. It’s like when a political candidate needs to flesh out his message, to go beyond slogans and give some specifics. So beyond loving our neighbors, we have a list, including much that you would expect: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; do not lag in zeal, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, extend hospitality to strangers. Even still, at least for a political candidate, the list is not concrete enough. I can hear the media now: “Give us some examples of what this all looks like”. And we do indeed need stories to bring these virtues alive – the person who takes a risk to speak out against the evil human rights abuses in China, the exhausted parent working two jobs out of ardent love and zeal for moving her children out of poverty, the person who struggles and keeps on praying in the face of doubt and despair, the church where strangers are truly welcome. If Paul were writing now, he’d have the stories on live video, real human beings, showing us goodness in the context of our everyday lives.

But Paul goes on, to harder teachings about love of neighbor – those XYZ’s that are so hard to achieve. As our political candidates must, Paul tells hard truths – he brings up some of the hardest parts of love – the parts we don’t think we can do, or don’t even want to do. We are asked to bless rather than curse our enemies, to feed them and not to seek revenge when we are harmed. Paul is clearly not a resource for today’s foreign policy advisors. Nor is he a resource for too many of us who live our lives in competitive, combat mode, who eschew forgiveness for getting even, who only act loving towards the people we like. To quote one of the speeches from last week (and I forget whose) Paul gives us “the power of example instead of the example of power” as a way to deal with adversaries.

But – just as we are ready to dismiss Paul’s teaching as unrealistic, he gives us a loophole! It’s like a candidate who fears being labeled as “soft” on dealing with potential enemies hastens to add that under some circumstances, he would be tough, that he could be counted on to protect our security. Paul says this: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” This is huge – whether you’re assessing going to war, or getting a divorce or getting along in the office. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you – we’re not in control of everything, and perfect love of neighbor and the goal of peace are not fully within our grasp. We humans have instincts and freedom to hurt as well as to love, and love of self can be a threat instead of a companion to love of neighbors.

And it is our love of self that can lead us to seek revenge – the next target of Paul’s advice. He says that vengeance should be left to God. It is for us to forgive our enemies and show it by treating them well – so, so hard! But, if we don’t, then our hatreds and conflicts endure, and we can become like our foes – giving them power by letting them define our character and prompt our actions. “He hit me, so I hit him back”.

We are to forgive, but is forgiveness an act of will, or is it, at least in part, something that happens to us, a refocusing of our sights on the one who has hurt us? This kind of refocusing happened to a young Episcopal priest of my acquaintance, a long time ago. He felt himself wronged by an older cleric, John, the rector for whom he worked, who fired him one Sunday with no warning and no substantive reason. The young priest moved on to other positions but harbored resentment, even hatred, for the next two years. But then the two priests found themselves at a clergy conference together. My friend totally avoided his former boss, snubbing him completely. But one morning, in the men’s room, the two happened to be next to each other, shaving. The younger man glanced over and saw, in the face of the other, a pain, a vulnerability that reminded him of his own father at some times when he’d hurt him. He felt in himself then a shift, a change in his bitter feelings. Later that day, the two men were in a small group – one of those T-groups common in the 60’s. The facilitator asked if anyone around the table had anything he wanted to say before the work began. The young priest spoke up, “There is no one in the world that I have more reason to dislike than John. But now, I find I don’t have those feelings any more.” After a pause, John replied, “No one has ever threatened me more than you.” That was all. From then on, the barrier was gone and there was ease between the two men – they even played poker that evening.

To me this is a forgiveness story, and it is one in which forgiveness comes about not through dogged striving, but really, by grace, by a change of heart brought about by unexpected circumstances. And maybe we can’t get to forgiveness on our own – maybe it only happens as a gift of grace. What Paul is asking, and what love demands, I think, from us, is to hold back from seeking vengeance – leave it alone; leave room for God.

Finally, after thinking about all of this, Jesus' words about taking up our cross and losing our lives to find life come a little more clear for me, although I'll probably always puzzle over them. Life can indeed feel like a cross – heavy and full of pain and the shadow of death and all the burdens we and others far less fortunate must bear. And we may try, but we can't ultimately avoid or shy away from this part of life, or we do lose. We lose something precious in trying to save what we think we most want – pleasure, safety, security and absence of pain. If we cling only to those, we lose life lived to the fullest. By this I mean we lose the true depth of the life of love. Life lived to the fullest, the life of loving and being loved comes always with pain and loss and the ache and longing and the fragility of caring about others as much as about ourselves.

This life involves all that Paul is writing about, and losing life that is shallow and selfish and unengaged is the only way to save ourselves for the much richer life that our humanity calls out for.

In the heat of an electoral season, perhaps some of these thoughts have a bearing on our national life. What crosses do we have to bear as a nation, and what leaders will call for this sacrifice, will speak truth to us about not only our goodness and what we want, but our great challenges and what will be needed. What about our national life and image must be lost in order to save the true life and heart and soul of this country?

Loving our neighbors and ourselves, as individuals and as a nation is basic Christianity, the very ABC's we need to keep practicing and applying in new and changing situations. Forgiveness, holding back from vengeance, using power constructively – all these parts of loving that are so hard and for which we need God's help are the XYZ's. It's a new season, a new year in school. May these words and the words of today's scriptures help us imagine new seasons for our own lives and a new season for our country. Amen.