

Sermon: Remembrance Sunday, November 13, 2022 – Luke 7: 1-10
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

As we read through the New Testament, the LOVE that Jesus calls us to is truly astonishing.

In the 13th chapter of John, (vv 34-35) Jesus says love is the identifier of a true disciple: “As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another”.

The apostle Paul, in the letter to the Romans (8:35-39), described a loving God’s desire to overcome all challenges by the power of love when he wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

1st John 1: 4-16 both simplifies and amplifies this in saying, “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them”.

And when Jesus was asked which commandment was first and foremost among the commands of Hebrew scripture, he paired two commandments about love (Mark 12: 28-31): Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; and Love your neighbour as yourself.

Clearly, love is something that is neither to be trifled with, nor ignored. It infuses and inspires our actions toward one another, it powerfully transcends our hardest challenges, and is the very essence of God. For those seeking a spiritual foundation for life, it’s all about Love.

And in the midst of all that joyous, powerful talk about love, Jesus, in the 5th chapter of Matthew (5: 43-45), also says this: “love your enemies.” He said, “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. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”

Loving God and neighbour is hard enough, but this? This is so much harder to hear, harder to believe, and harder to do. And because Jesus knew, from the time he first said those words right up to this very moment, that his command to love our enemies is something we want to pretend was just an exaggeration intended for dramatic effect, he kept including that message time and time again in his teaching, in his parables – such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10: 35-37, with its surprising hero – and in his actions, like the reading from Luke 7 we heard this morning.

Jesus enters Capernaum, then this: “a centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.” (Luke 7: 2-3)

While my ears perk up at the word “slave”, wanting this to be a story where Jesus miraculously becomes a 21st century person, frees the slave and chides the slaveholder, the word that would have caught the attention of the first audience was “Centurion.” Regardless of how swell a guy he was portrayed to be by the Jewish elders in Luke’s account, to most Jews “Centurion” meant only one thing: “enemy.” Or, to be more specific, “power-wielding enemy to be both hated and feared.”

New Testament Professor Jeannine K. Brown writes,

“Centurions had a middling role in the hierarchy of the Roman army, put in charge of about 80 soldiers but situated below those who commanded cohorts (consisting of six centuries) and legions (consisting of ten cohorts)....As the centurion is given authority from above to command those under him, so the implication is that Jesus has an authority from God that he can enact simply by saying the word. The centurion’s faith in Jesus’ authority proves to be well placed when Jesus heals his slave without visiting his home (Luke 7:10).

“Somehow, it seems fitting in this surprising story that Jesus himself is surprised and amazed at the trust this centurion demonstrates (Luke 7:9). He is surprised to find faith in a centurion that surpasses what he has seen in anyone from Israel. And we can learn something from Jesus’ own surprise at the specter of an enemy soldier proving to be a model of faith for the people of God. Maybe we should not be surprised by the unlikely places that faith shows up in our own world. It could even show up in those we think are our enemies.”

Jesus, then, tells us to love our enemies; he tells stories in which commonly held enemies like Samaritans are the heroes; and he then walks the walk as well as talking the talk, by responding positively to the request for healing from a despised centurion, to enact a healing in the Centurion’s household. Within his talk about enemies, I think Jesus would also have us deal kindly with those parts of our own personality and life’s story that we might otherwise treat with contempt. And in each case, Jesus contrasts commonly-held religious practices and beliefs with a radical love that reaches far, far beyond what is usually recommended or even allowed, a love that reaches so far that even one’s enemy is within its embrace.

Although I firmly believe that “enemy” is a mode of viewing the world that we need to leave behind if we are to actually embrace the far-reaching love and forgiveness that Jesus speaks of, we do live in a world of friends and foes. I may not identify many enemies from my standpoint but I know there’s people out there that don’t like me, at all. The pointed rhetoric of a two-party system, evidenced in the mid-term elections in the US is so intentionally adversarial, and the past couple of years have shown us the divisiveness that scars this land as well. And as we pause today in a spirit of remembrance, I do have a wee story to tell, about one’s approach to one’s enemies.

Three years ago when I was on sabbatical at Norwich Cathedral in the UK, I learned the life story of a woman whose name is familiar to us. I expect we’ve all seen Mount Edith Cavell, just south of Jasper. What I did not know, was that her name is actually pronounced KAV’il (rhymes with “gravel” as the locals say) and that she was a World War I heroine born and raised just outside Norwich.

Already well-known in nursing circles for establishing a nursing school in Brussels, Edith rose to international prominence for her work once the German forces invaded Belgium. What was visible, was her complete willingness to treat injured soldiers, regardless of their nationality; what was happening behind the scenes, were her efforts to smuggle injured soldiers and civilians out of Belgium. By August 1915 she was found out, and on October 12th of that year was executed by a German firing squad.

Her martyrdom was condemned throughout the British Empire, in Belgium and in France, and in the USA, and her heroism was used as a rallying cry for those previously unmoved by the brutality of The Great War. Memorial gardens were established in her name, October 12th is set aside each year by the Church of England to commemorate her and, well, there's that mountain. At Norwich, she is remembered with pride and so are her last words. As reported by Rev. Stirling Gahan, Nurse Cavell said this on the evening before her execution: 'I have no fear nor shrinking. I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me ... But this I would say, standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realize that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.'

Love God and Love your neighbour, says Jesus...and, oh, love your enemy. Jesus was undeterred at a healing requested by a Centurion. Edith Cavell treated the wounds of friend and foe alike, and would not give in to hatred even when facing end of life at the hands of her captors. Each of us, I suspect, can name many such examples, of places where love of enemy has been shown. Is there a way, then, that this message of a fearless, durable, divinely-ordained love, can find a more prominent place in our hearts in 2022? Is there a way that the we-vs-them binaries that dominate public opinion, can be dismantled, that weaponized words can be defused and replaced with a new commitment to listening and respect? Is there a way, that we can connect with the healing love evidenced in this story of a Centurion in ancient Capernaum, who reached beyond the usual boundaries to find healing? I leave these questions with you, with the hope and prayer that we will live into the answers as we seek peace in our lives, our communities, and our world... a peace that lives not just in theory, but in practice. In Christ, may God's core gift of reconciling love find a way. Amen.

References cited and consulted:

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