

“Ending Othering”
Luke 6:27-38
St. Paul’s UCC
February 28, 2019

Valentine’s Day was only two weeks ago. We often treat this familiar scripture as if it were one of those boxes of Valentine greetings that we have to make sure we address to every member of our class, even those we don’t really care for. But in the spirit of the holiday, and so everyone gets an equal number of cards (meaning we get as many as the most popular kids in the class), we dutifully sign our name and send out wishes of love.

We know Jesus didn’t teach warm fuzzy lessons. We know we usually squirm when we really listen to what Jesus says. So there must be more to this scripture than Valentine platitudes.

OK - what about the other extreme. Enemy means just what it says. One of the other scripture passages that say the same thing appeared in the lectionary after 9/11. No one was particularly interested in a sermon suggesting we needed to love those who had done such a horrible thing, the terrorists. I wasn’t preaching that Sunday, but that was the crux of the sermon. Nor would this have been particularly comforting during World War II if Germans or Japanese were referenced. I even suspect that it would not have been a prized scripture reading during what some call the War of Northern Aggression when this Valley suffered so much in the Burning. Loving your enemy is tough work!

Jesus speaks to us in the middle ground also – between the Valentine platitudes and the crisis of war. Jesus spoke to those crowds who gathered to hear him preach. Jesus spoke to his own disciples. And Jesus speaks to us.

Put yourself back in the crowd listening to this new teacher. It would have been a Jewish gathering – people wanting to hear this religious man speak about the God they shared.

Those that heard him would have had a shared heritage – the sure knowledge that centuries before God had spoken to their ancestors and had called them “Chosen People”. They had been picked out of all the peoples of the earth to receive God’s favor – to be given a land of milk and honey – to be a light to the nations – to receive God’s preference and help in times of conflict and in times of peace as long as they kept the covenant.

Yes, they had failed at that time after time and had paid the price. The Kingdom of King David and King Solomon had split into two nations. The Northern Kingdom had been conquered by Assyria. The Southern Kingdom had been conquered by Babylonia. Under the Persians the Exiles had been allowed to return home and the Temple had been rebuilt. They were still a subject nation, but things were improving. They gained their independence under the Hasmoneans because of the leadership of the Maccabees. It was a rocky road, but it was moving in the correct direction. Then Pompey the Great came and Rome was in charge.

Yet they lived in hope. Hadn’t they heard John the Baptist say that this Jesus was the Promised One, the Messiah! The time had surely come when the Jewish people would be reinstated in their own land, land given to them by God, to be God’s Chosen Ones.

Many would have heard these words from a position of “chosen privilege”. With the coming of the Messiah, they could love everyone and do good things because they were in the unique position of prestige. We won’t act like those other people have acted.

Then within the Twelve, one would have heard Jesus’ words with a great deal of discomfort. The writer of the Gospel of Luke identifies Simon as a Zealot. The Zealots were one of the branches of Judaism in the first century, along with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Zealots were convinced that force might be necessary against Rome in order to reestablish Jewish Independence. The dictionary definition reads: *a member of an ancient Jewish sect aiming at a world*

Jewish theocracy and resisting the Romans until AD 70. One of Jesus' disciples was a Zealot. These words would not have rested well on his ears!

What about us? How do the words of Jesus rest on our ears?

We need to face squarely the whole idea of "enemy". Many will say, I don't have any enemies. I get along with almost everyone. Others will think of a friend or a relative that has been a particular bone of contention and just put them into a special category. We don't get along and never will. It's just how it is. We just accommodate to that reality. It's not open warfare. I wish we could reconcile, but we tried and it doesn't work. We're not enemies exactly, we just aren't friends. But I love that person in a Christian love and know God will sort everything out someday.

In the meantime, there is this "elephant in the room". It is how we think of ourselves – from either a position of privilege or a position of victimhood – and how we think of "others".

"Others" – we need to hear Jesus speak to us about our habit of "othering" – making individuals and groups of people into "something less than we are".

For this is really naming them an enemy of how we want to think of ourselves. This is the threat we fear. This is what turns into conflicts. This is what dehumanizes peoples. This is what we do to named enemies. And this is a stain on our souls and our relationship with Jesus and the One who created us.

Jesus asks us to end the othering, to truly be in relationship with one another (not taking offense at every insult, giving more than is asked, getting to know our differences, affirming our sisters and brothers in their life, breaking down the barriers of resistance and working together for the common good – a good that is envisioned in God's Kingdom here on earth.

If we are going to even attempt to end “othering” we need to think about the ways we look an act toward people we casually think of as “other”.

1. We separate. It’s a common practice – has been for centuries, even millennia. In fact the Jewish audience at Jesus feet had separated themselves under the idea of “the Chosen Ones”. When my ancestors came to these shores in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, my Puritan ancestors (the same religious ancestors of the United Church of Christ) were determined to act and be a “city on the hill” – a distinct group of people dedicated to God and an example to everyone else. My other ancestors, who came over on the same boats, were religious refugees from England also – only they were Quakers. It didn’t take long for the tension to arise and Quakers, Baptists, and Anabaptists were “separated” from the Puritans – they were made the “other”. Rhode Island was developed with these folks.

2. We discriminate. I grew up in the Jim Crow south. A railroad track separated the white community from the black community. The water fountains were labeled “White” and “Colored”. (Although I honestly cannot remember ever seeing someone who was Black on the streets of that town where they could even use the “Colored” water fountain placed alongside the “White” drinking fountain. Our schools were completely segregated – even through the years past Brown vs. Board of Education. The train station had separate entrances and waiting rooms. The tragic legacy that began 400 years ago this year in our own state of Virginia with the arrival of the first slaves continued a hundred years after the end of the Civil War as people of color were the “other”.

3. We appropriate culture without any consideration of the meaning about things. Jim Crow laws as such became history, but the practice of regarding people of color as “other” continues. Here in 2019 questions have arisen as to what is the big deal about “black face” as our state government reels with exposure to that practice. At the very same time the fashion house of Gucci introduces a blackface ski mask and seems confused why that is offensive to anyone.

4. We judge. Why don't those folks stay in the closet like it was when I was young? I learned information in school or at home and therefore all that transgender, gender identity stuff is just made up and people should act like "regular" people. Depression is a figment of imagination – just get over it and step up to life. I don't trust the looks of that person. It's just a lot of fancy names to justify unruly behavior. Follow the rules, behave yourself or stay at home. Or the time-honored – group of individuals (fill in the blank) don't have the mental or physical capacity to do (fill in the blank)

5. We victimize. All (fill in the blank) are (fill in the blank). The list for those blanks is quite long. I can't even say the examples because I don't want to verbalize the deep racism and anti-Semitism that is the root of the words. They are "enemy-defining" words. The "other" is the one to be feared and eliminated or removed.

Jesus teaches an alternative vision to "othering". His words resonate with dream so beautifully articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial:

Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooting in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

- This is a dream whose foundation goes far before 1963 or even 1620.
- It is a dream whose grounding is made at the dawn of Creation as God created human beings and said "It is good".

- It is a dream that Jesus declared there in the Sermon on the Plain as told in the Gospel of Luke: Love one another.
- It is a dream that goes beyond Valentine platitudes.
- It is at the heart of our living – how we look at each other, how we talk to one another, how we look at ourselves.
- It is a dream that replaces thinking of people as “others” with looking at how we navigate this world together.
- It is a dream that depends on joining hands and recognizing our common humanity, not looking down from our positions of privilege.
- It is a dream that will transform the world if we only so choose.
- It is the Good News that Jesus spoke to those with ears to hear and hearts to respond. May we listen to Jesus.

Amen.