

LENT #4: GIVE UP YOUR RESENTMENTS

(03/26/17)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 18:21-22
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

"Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." (Meister Eckhart)

In our worship this Lenten season, we have been focusing on the practice of "giving up." As the thirteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart said, "Spirituality is a matter of less, not more." Buddhism reminds us that suffering arises as a result of our attachments. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world, we need to identify that which we grasp or seek to control and learn to let this go. We need to identify and let go of that which holds us back from the experience of new life in Christ.

In our Tuesday afternoon study group, where we have been discussing the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu spiritual classic, we have noted that Krishna transmitted this very same teaching to Arjuna: that the self-centeredness or egocentricity that underlies all our attachments is the cause of our suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. He tells Arjuna that our self-centeredness needs to be replaced by God-centeredness. The apostle Paul tells us we need to die to the old self to be reborn into the new life that is offered to us by Christ and also in Christ.

The first week of Lent we focused on giving up our illusions: illusions about ourselves; views of our brothers and sisters that are distorted by prejudice; and illusions or false concepts that we hold about God. The second week we examined how our attachment to material possessions can undermine our spiritual journey, how it can create a barrier that separates us from our brothers and sisters. Last week we looked at our preoccupation with a future we cannot control, not only our negative and fearful expectations of this future, which is the root cause of our anxiety, but even those goals and objectives which have, over time, become the standards by which we judge ourselves and others. Each of these barriers is grounded in self-centeredness. The solution to each is to learn to let it go.

This morning I would like us to examine one more barrier that can hold us back from the experience of new life in Christ. This is the barrier of the past.

As we noted last week, the future is not real; it is an illusion. However, the past is also not real; it is a memory. In fact, it is a distorted memory. Our memories of the past have been unconsciously selected, often grouped or clustered around a certain theme that Jung would call a

complex. For example, people who see themselves as victims retain memories of how cruel people have been to them, while people who do not see themselves as victims retain different sets of memories. Our memories create the picture we have of the world and, conversely, the picture we have of the world creates or helps us select those memories that we retain.

On one sense, of course, we know that the past was real. It happened, though we might be a little more circumspect about our belief that the reality of the past is identical to the way we experienced it and remember it. There is no doubt that the experiences of the past helped to create us. They also shape our present reality, the world in which we live. Ultimately, however, we have to let the past go. We have to live life in the present, to see the present through new eyes, not through spectacles that were handed to us in the past or by the past.

The inability to let go of the past can prevent us from living life fully in the present and creating a better future. Take the example of international conflicts, e.g., the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. I am a very hopeful person, but I have my doubts if these two peoples are ever going to be able to live together in peace. Why? Because they both not only remember the past; they keep the past alive in their memories. They retell the stories time and time again. This means that they live their present lives on the basis of what they remember from the past.

The Israelis remember every atrocity that has been committed by a Palestinian. They remember how many people have died from Palestinian suicide bombers. They can tell you all the ways in which the Palestinian Authority has broken the terms of treaties. These events are in their memory banks. They may even have happened pretty much as they are remembered. The problem is that the Israelis are attached to this past. They are attached to their own experience of the past in such a way that it cuts them off from the present and the possibility of a just and peaceful future. It keeps them from rediscovering the Palestinians, especially the younger generation who may not be the same as generations past. It locks them into a victim stance, an inability to trust, and a concomitant desire for more and more power, more and more security.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, remember every atrocity that has been committed by the Israeli military, every Palestinian civilian who has been killed, every house that has been leveled by Israeli bulldozers. They remember how they were forcibly removed from their homeland, how they became refugees, and how strongly Israel has resisted the two-state solution that alone would seem to offer a possibility of peace. Palestinian families who have lost loved

ones in this conflict cling to the past. Because of their attachment to the past, they are unable to sit down at table with the Israelis and work out a solution to their problems, to recognize Israel's right to exist, and to find a way to share access to the holy sites that have such deep meaning and significance to Judaism, Islam, and also to Christianity.

When I was traveling in northwest India in 1999, at the time of an outbreak of hostility between India and Pakistan concerning control of the province of Kashmir, I discovered the people of India were clear about the situation. They had a good grasp of the history of the conflict--from their perspective. I didn't doubt that what they said about the Muslim persecution of the Hindus following the British withdrawal from India was correct. I just wondered what kind of history I might hear if I were talking with people in Pakistan.

From my reading, the Hindus were just as inhumane in their treatment of Muslims who were living in India as the Muslims were to the Hindus that were living in East and West Pakistan. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated not by a Muslim but by a Hindu right-wing nationalist who was threatened by Gandhi's belief that Hindus and Muslims ought to be able to live together. India and Pakistan, who are both nuclear powers, need to live together in peace and harmony. I don't see how this can happen, how the future of Kashmir can be decided, until each lets go of the hurts of the past and sits down at table with the one who is seen as the enemy, until each recognizes the validity of the other's experience of the past, and until both become vulnerable enough to take a chance on creating a new future.

The same dynamic is true of us as individuals. Most of us have experienced hurt and betrayal. If we are honest, if we do not harbor illusions about ourselves, we will also admit that we have hurt and betrayed others. The memories of the times and ways we have hurt and betrayed others, however, seem to fade more quickly from our memory bank. What we retain in our memory bank are the ways that others have hurt us.

Go ahead. Keep your hurts and resentments. Hold them to your heart. Nurture them. I guarantee that they will cut you off from the other person and they will cut you off from life. I'm not saying we should be in denial about the past, especially when hurtful things were done to us. What I am suggesting is that we learn to let go of these hurts. By keeping them enshrined in our memory and in our hearts, we poison ourselves and we poison our present relationships. The

resentment becomes an excuse not to trust, not to be vulnerable, not to love. When this happens, we have allowed the past to take away our present and also our future.

In his letter to the church in Corinth the apostle Paul tells us that love is not resentful. Paul believed that this was a fundamental characteristic of Christian love. Love heals relationships. It also heals memories. It helps us to let go of our self-centered obsession with how we have been wronged that we might live life fully, joyfully, and lovingly in the present.

In this morning's gospel lesson Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive. In the Revised Standard and King James versions of the Bible Peter asks how often he should forgive his brother. In the New Revised Standard Version Peter asks how often he should forgive a fellow member of the church. I like the older translations better. First, I have a major problem with my brother, so the matter of forgiving my biological brother speaks to me. Second, I don't see how Peter could have been talking about members of the church when there was no church.

I find it interesting that in the new translation, Jesus tells Peter he should forgive a fellow church member seventy-seven times. In the old translations, Jesus tells Peter he should forgive his brother seventy times seven. That's four hundred ninety. I don't want to get technical, but that's quite a difference. I usually like the translation we use in church, the New Revised Standard Version, but this is one time when I like the King James Version better. I can just hear Lee Cummings' voice whispering in my ear, "Finally you are beginning to see the light!"

Jesus did not cling to the past. He did not harbor resentments. He held no feelings of bitterness toward Peter, who denied him, the disciples who deserted him, and even Judas who betrayed him. When he was dying on the cross he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus was able to let go of the past to live fully in the present. He was not self-centered, focusing on his own hurt, but was God-centered, focusing on God's love for even those who were unconsciously hateful and cruel. In the prayer he taught us, Jesus tells us we should forgive others their trespasses, their debts, their sins because we have been forgiven by God.

I know what you're thinking. You're talking about Jesus. How can you expect me to live like Jesus? How can I forgive my brother, who has wronged me, seventy times seven? This is not what I expect of you; it is what God expects of us. I have to learn to forgive my brother and everyone else who has wronged me, just as I have to learn to forgive myself for all the conscious and unconscious, all the intentional and unintentional ways I have hurt others.

The apartheid government of South Africa imprisoned Nelson Mandela for twenty-seven years, six months, and seven days, not for having committed a crime but for advocating equal rights for his people. After he was released, Mandela became the leader of a united South Africa; he became the president of both whites and blacks. He could do this because he not only harbored no desire for revenge; he harbored no resentment in his heart. How was he able to do this? I don't know what his religion is, but he has to be a man of faith. There has to be a strong spiritual core at the center of his life.

To forgive is not to erase the past, for the past can never be erased. To forgive is to let go of our attachment to the past, especially to the resentments and hurts that we harbor and which serve to alienate us from those we love, from the possibility of relationship in the present, and from life itself.

As we continue on our Lenten journey, our journey toward Easter and new life, let us think about the many ways in which we can be imprisoned by our past, how our memories of the past, which may be distorted or selectively chosen, can cut us off from seeing clearly in the present, how our hurts and resentments can cut us off from the kind of love of which the apostle Paul speaks.

Then let us pray for God's help in giving up our resentments that we might experience the fullness of new life that is promised to us not only by Christ but also in Christ.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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