

LOVE, HATE, AND FORGIVENESS

(06/03/18)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Mt. 18:35)

This morning, as we prepare to partake of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I would like us to think about forgiveness. This is an important theme in our relationship with God. It is an important theme in all our relationships--with our parents (living or dead), with our spouse or partner, with our brother or sister, with our friend, and with our children. In all these parts of our life, Jesus offers us the possibility of forgiveness and, at the same time, the possibility of healing.

The Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas once suggested that the antidote to hate is not love, but forgiveness. If this is indeed the case, then forgiveness is one of the paths that can lead to our experience of the kingdom of heaven.

Thomas tells us that hate is a poison. Hate fills our life with a dark set of feelings. When we hate, the hate hurts us much more than it does the person whom we hate. We carry that hate within us every minute of the day; the person whom we hate seldom (if ever) encounters it. In fact, the person may not even know that we hate him/her. Even worse, the person may know but not really care!

When I first encountered this teaching I found it interesting, but I thought that it didn't apply to me. I was taught that it is not good to hate. I confess that I do find some people annoying or irritating. There are some people that I simply do not like. There are some people whom I would not choose to accompany me in a trip across the country in a car with no radio. But I don't really hate anyone.

Then I stumbled across (or stumbled over) a book by the Tibetan Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. The book is an account of his trek, his kora around Mt. Kailas, the sacred mountain in Tibet that I visited in 1999 with Corey and that I circumambulated in 2001 (and would like to circumambulate just once more). It contains Thurman's teachings on the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice of *The Blade Wheel of Mind Reform*.

In his teaching Thurman explores the Tibetan Buddhist belief that hate is not an isolated feeling or emotion but is the name for a general category of feelings or emotions.

Thurman suggests that feeling irritated, annoyed, angry, or resentful are all variations or subcategories of hate.

I admit I was quite skeptical, as you probably are, when I first read this. I can see where resentment, which I understand to be a lingering, smoldering, often unexpressed anger might be a variation of hate, a subcategory of hate, but do anger, annoyance, and irritation fall into the same category? I had my doubts about this.

Then I began to think about the Buddhist teaching from a Christian perspective. From a Christian perspective love is the opposite of hate. Jesus tells us that we should love our enemies. The Tibetan Buddhists show us how we can move from hate to love: they tell us that the path from hate to love leads through understanding and forgiveness.

If love is the opposite of hate, then perhaps love is also a larger category within which we should place other feelings or emotions. Perhaps caring is simply a variation or a subcategory of love. Sympathy, empathy, and compassion may be simply variations or subcategories of love. Friendship may be nothing more than a special kind of love.

If this is true, then there may be two main emotions--love and hate, and many emotions that are variations or partial expressions of these two. From an ontological point of view, the two fundamental realities of life and of the universe may be the polarities of love and hate. From the testimony of the Bible, both of these emotions appear to be characteristic of God, to be integral parts of God's nature. When God is patient or impatient, pleased or displeased, punishing or forgiving, destroying or creating, these may be subcategories of the fundamental polarity of love and hate that the ancient Israelites experienced in their God.

Let's think for just a minute about Thomas's teaching regarding the importance of forgiveness as an antidote to the poison of hate. When we say that we can't stand certain people, that we find them annoying, that we are constantly angry with them, but we don't actually hate them and therefore we don't need to forgive them, we may be throwing away a valuable tool, a valuable antidote to a wide range of poisonous emotions within us.

In his conversation with Peter about forgiveness, Jesus teaches him and us about relationships, about building and maintaining Christian community. Whether we translate the Greek word for the person to whom Peter refers as "brother," "disciple," or

“member of the community,” there is no doubt that Jesus cares about community. He cares about relationships. He cares about the church. He also cares about each of us as individuals. We need to remember that this particular passage is included in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven can be understood as a state of affairs in the world, a time when people will live in peace and harmony with each other, a time when “the wolf will lie down with the lamb.” As Christians and as a Christian church we want to do our part to bring about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven on earth. However, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven can also refer to an inner spiritual reality.

The kingdom of heaven is the experience of being *with God*, the experience of being *in God*. It involves being centered in Christ and living our life out of that center. It is an experience of heaven, an experience of eternity *right here and now*. This is a present or a potential experience for each and every one of us. It may also become our experience after we die, depending on whether we experienced the kingdom of heaven, lived out of it, and helped to make it a reality while we were alive.

The kingdom of heaven is an experience of peace, joy, and love. Jesus tells us how to experience this, how to “dwell within” the kingdom of heaven. He tells us how important forgiveness is to the realization of this profound religious experience and state of being. He tells us there are two dimensions to this experience of forgiveness. The first is God’s forgiveness, and how our experience of that forgiveness can lead to a deeper relationship with God. The second is our forgiveness of others, and how the experience of that forgiveness can lead to compassion and love for our brothers and sisters.

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant Jesus tells us that the two are inextricably intertwined.

A servant owes his master 10,000 talents. This is a lot of money! It is the equivalent of fifteen years’ wages of a laborer. We wonder how he came to owe his master so much. Was it bad luck? Was it the result of mismanagement? In any event, the servant carries a huge debt, a debt that is beyond his capacity to repay.

When we apply this metaphor, this parable to our relationship with God, we can see that this could easily happen. When we have bad habits like impatience, anger, or a tendency to be judgmental, we inflict the pain of our mental state on people every day. A

Buddhist would tell us that every time we do this we are building up bad karma. Believe me, we can build up an awful lot of bad karma very quickly in this lifetime! From this point of view, it is not much of a stretch to believe that the servant (us) could owe the master (God) so much that the debt cannot be repaid in this lifetime. If we are honest, we will admit that we have not been good stewards of this life that God has given us, including our care for God's other children.

The servant begs his lord for patience. He asks for time to repay the debt. The lord gives him more than what he asks; he releases his servant and forgives the debt. The lord wipes the servant's slate clean.

How *should* the servant feel? A tremendous weight has been lifted from his shoulders. The servant should feel both gratitude and love. This should lead to sympathy, empathy, and compassion for those who find themselves deeply in debt, who through either bad luck or the mismanagement of their lives have dug themselves a deep hole.

But how *does* the servant feel? His lack of gratitude is apparent. He encounters a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. This is the equivalent of a day's wages for a laborer. This pales in comparison to the debt that the servant owed to his lord.

The servant is apparently untouched by the grace, the freely given gift of his lord. He demands payment of the fellow servant. The indebted servant asks for pity, for time, for patience, just as he did. However, the servant shows his debtor no compassion. He has him thrown into prison and demands that he repay the debt in full.

When the other servants see what has happened, they tell the lord. The lord calls his servant in and confronts him on his lack of mercy. He then retracts his offer of forgiveness and demands payment of the debt in full. When the servant is unable to pay, the lord throws him in jail. A Buddhist would call this karma. What goes around comes around! When we don't forgive others, we have no right to ask for or expect forgiveness. We don't deserve forgiveness.

Then Jesus tells his listeners, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister *from your heart*." From your heart!

Jesus tells us that God's forgiveness of us is dependent on our ability, our willingness to forgive others. If we demand justice of others, we should expect justice to

be demanded of us by God. If we are judgmental of others, we should expect to be judged. If we show mercy to others, God will show mercy to us.

Most of us want God to treat us mercifully rather than justly. We would rather be held in the arms of a loving parent than on the beams of a scale of justice. In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "forgive us our debts *as we* forgive our debtors." *As we* forgive our debtors. Think about it. This is a pretty heavy statement!

When we pray this prayer, we are asking God to forgive us *to the extent* that we forgive others--no more, no less. If we do not forgive others their trespasses, we have no right to expect God to forgive ours. If we do not forgive others when they offend us, we cannot ask God to forgive our sin. This makes our forgiveness of others very important, not only for the restoration of relationship, but also for our own souls. If we are unable or unwilling to forgive, we can never experience the kingdom of heaven.

People sometimes say, "I can forgive but I will never forget." However, when we truly forgive, the memory loses what psychoanalysts would call its *cathexis*, the energy that keeps it alive within our unconscious. The memory then simply fades away. We don't exactly erase the memory; the memory sort of erases itself over time.

This means we have a choice. We can try to keep the memory alive, the story alive, and hence fuel our hatred. Or we can let it go. When we do, we will experience the liberating experience of forgiveness. We will find ourselves in the kingdom of heaven and in a loving relationship with those around us.

Jesus tells us that we must love our enemies, not only for their benefit but also for our own. Unless we do this, we cannot experience the kingdom of God within us and we cannot create the kingdom of God on earth. Thomas Aquinas tells us that the process of loving our enemy starts with forgiveness. Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison of hatred, to the poison of anger and resentment. Forgiveness is at least under our control. We can let go of our anger by letting go of our stories, by not keeping them alive, by not enshrining them in our hearts.

Jesus tells us that the measure we give will be the measure we get. He tells us that God will forgive us our trespasses *to the extent* that we forgive others. He then tells us to think about the implications of this very profound prayer. He tells us that our souls

will remain poisoned, that we will remain in prison, until we forgive our brother or sister “from our heart.” In other words, until we *really* forgive.

“Lord, forgive us our debts *as we* forgive our debtors.”

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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