

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday
November 6, 2016
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Luke 6:20-31 – “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

The words of today's gospel stand in stark contrast to the harsh, often unseemly, cruel, and bitter rhetoric of a political season that will end on Tuesday. The issues that have made it so contentious will not go away on Tuesday, however; so we will still be left to decide what kind of people we will be in the face of deep divisions and different visions for who we are as a people in this country.

I'd like to suggest we start with today's gospel. These words sound a challenge to all of us not only to think beyond our differences, but to act in ways that restore us to right relationships.

Jesus begins by blessing the poor, the hungry, the sad, the hated; and he pronounces woes on the rich, the full, the happy, and those who are well thought of. It can all sound a bit odd to the ears of people who feel blessed when we are rich, full, happy, and well thought of, and cursed when we are poor, hungry, sad, and hated by others. Like many of Jesus' sayings, they force us to question our assumptions about the way the world works or ought to work.

And then he says: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It is Jesus' pronouncement about what the world looks like when we finally live by the ethic of love – a world where restoration, not retribution, is the goal of justice; where non-violent action has greater power than violence; where generosity and mutuality insure that all have what they need; where others' needs are as important to us as our own.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The Golden Rule. Everybody believes in the golden rule, right?! Most people would probably say they do. But have we really thought about just how radical it is?

It seems perfectly obvious – and in fact, all major religious traditions espouse some version of these very words. We can all agree that it's a good idea. But in actual practice, it's a novel – and a pretty radical! – idea.

For most of human history, a very different kind of expectation has ruled. When somebody steals something, you get your tribe together and go on a rampage to wipe out the offender's village. Revenge – a kind of indiscriminate justice whose primary aim is to punish an offender and anyone associated with him, without regard to how the punishment fits the crime. Or hitting back so hard against someone that they'll never want to do something against you again. We can still find versions of this kind of justice around and surviving with their own logic well intact. We sometimes take it even a step further and engage in preemptive justice – do unto others BEFORE they do unto you! I would suggest that racial profiling is a vestige of such an ethic.

The consequences of this kind of justice can be devastating to society and to our souls, and keep us trapped in our more primitive nature.

And so a different and more enlightened approach to human relations eventually came into being, something more fair, and equal, what legal scholars might call proportional justice – the good old “eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” such as we see enshrined in the law of Moses. We often hear that phrase used with disdain, but it actually makes a good bit of sense, and it is a great improvement over the more primitive and indiscriminate justice of revenge or preemption. So, under the “eye for an eye” kind of justice, when you do something against me, I (or society) get to pay you back in a way that is roughly equal to the offense you committed. Very controlled, civilized. Seems fair, huh? “Do unto others as they do unto you!”

The biggest problem with “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” however, is that you end up with lots of blind and toothless people. It’s still focused on negative actions, and lacks incentives for more positive human relations.

And then we hear Jesus say: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Now that is radical. It’s a game changer. It invites us to imagine what we would want someone else to do to us, and then do that very thing for the other. The Golden Rule, it turns out, is not just a cliché, and it is definitely not for weaklings! Doing to others as you would have them do to you involves active returning of good for evil, altering the course of human reactivity and restoring us to right relations. It involves *loving* our enemies, not hating them. And we all know how hard that can be. You might even say impossible.

Today we remember all the saints, that great cloud of witnesses who have left us examples of what it is to live more fully into this way of love. We often associate “the saints” with those who have lived particularly holy lives, even heroic lives of great personal sanctity and sacrifice – and we easily imagine that that could never be us, and certainly not society in general. But the saints were and are in fact people like us.

I love Leonard Cohen’s definition of a saint. He says:

What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of [someone] setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity

of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such [people], such balancing monsters of love.¹

We're all going to need some of that "balance in the chaos of existence" as we continue our journey through these tumultuous times. We should not imagine ourselves setting the universe in order, but riding the drifts, caressing the hills, loving the world so much that we give ourselves to the laws of gravity and chance. We should love the shapes of human beings, the fine and (yes, sometimes) twisted shapes of the heart – and through it all, be those balancing "monsters of love" who never give up on us finding the better way.

As we think about what it means to "do to others as we want them to do to us," I am reminded of another ancient quote: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." That's a great place to begin -- empathy for the other.

On this All Saints' Sunday we are reminded of all the saints who have gone before. Some of them did so with heroic deeds and lives that helped us to see the very face of God. Others limped along like most of us do most of the time, but still finding balance in the chaos of existence. As I look around this church today at all the saints gathered here, I am reminded of the company of saints that transcends time and space, past present and yet to come, people of all cultures and languages and nations, and of just how much we depend on them all – and on all of you – to help make our new life in Christ the new reality for our world. Today we recommit ourselves to that journey.

¹ Leonard Cohen Beautiful Losers (1966)