

Epiphany VII Year C 2019

My first day of class in Seminary was September, 11, 2001... September 11, 2001. Like many of you who remember that terrible day, I remember exactly where I was when the first plane flew into the World Trade Center in New York City. We lived about thirty minutes from the Seminary in West Austin, and I was about half-way when Carl Castles, the announcer for NPR, said that a commuter plane had just struck the World trade center. By the time I reached the campus, another plane had struck the other tower; and it wasn't a commuter plane, but a jumbo jet instead; and there were emerging reports of other planes unaccounted for. By the time we had gathered in the auditorium for class, the twin towers of the World Trade Center were collapsing. I remember being so very frightened; almost to the point of panic. One of my classmates had a brother who worked in one of the twin towers. He survived, but nearly three thousand people were killed that day.

The following Sunday churches were packed all around Austin... people looking for a way to get their minds around such a spectacular tragedy. What had happened to the world we lived in... why would anyone do such a thing?... why would God allow such a thing as this? If God is so very good, why would God allow evil in the world? Over the next weeks and months our government looked for an

enemy to blame, vowing that we would get even, that we would bring our enemy to justice. We know now in hindsight that the perpetrators were Saudi Arabians, but the United States attacked Iraq instead, destabilizing the region; still a mess.... And then troops were sent to Afghanistan to fight the presumed enemy there... and we are there still... the longest military conflict in American history; and It is my guess that most American citizens can't tell you who exactly the enemy is. It is a recurring pattern; a pattern of fear and loathing. Violence the calling card. It is a pattern of the absurd.

Several months later, Katharine, Katie and I went home to Dothan for Christmas.... Dothan would be the family gathering place for Christmas that year. My brother Taylor's wife's sister had married my college roommate... and they were to join us as well. We had a big dinner party. Tad, my college roommate for two years, and his wife Christin had lived for a time in New York... and Tad was so obsessed with the nine eleven tragedy that he read the New York Times every day to see if a new body had been found in the rubble of the World Trade Center. You may remember the motto that emerged from nine eleven.... "United we stand!" United against some unseen foe... Tad was all gung ho about 'united we stand', and soon after a lot of drinking, and well into the night Tad and I got into an argument. He felt we should identify the enemy and destroy them... give them

what they deserve. I argued that while that may be justified... that perhaps we should be spending our energy on asking the question of what would motivate terrorists so much that they would commit suicide attacks on our country, and in particular the symbolic financial center of the western world. The argument heated up, and the dinner party dispersed with hurt feelings, and it was years later that Tad and I would finally speak to each other again.

Today's Gospel reading is one that preachers would rather not have to deal with... And we preachers are lucky, because this passage doesn't appear all that often... The lectionary cycle of Gospel readings is every three years, but this passage only occurs late in Epiphany, that is it only appears when Easter is late, and thus the Epiphany season being more Sundays than usual.... Or, since we are in Mobile, when Mardi Gras is late... so I looked, and this passage has only appeared once in the lectionary in the last seventeen years... that's how many years I've been preaching... But alas, here it is: "Love your enemies... do good to those who hate you... bless those who curse you... pray for those who abuse you." Wow!

So you've heard me say over and over again... that the Jesus Movement is a resistance movement... that it is at its heart social and economic activism... that

Jesus and his disciples are challenging the powers that be, the so-called status quo... They are challenging what the liberation theologians would call the oppressive structures of sin in our world.... Clearly Jesus in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke is calling out the hypocrisy of the powerful elite and the wealthy.... So I agree with me! And I agree with others who characterize the Jesus Movement this way; but there is more, a deeper knowledge... there is more than the imperative for social and economic justice, as important as that is. Luke speaks of a reversal of the social and economic order... redistributed wealth, shared social status.... But Luke is also speaking of a reversal, if you will, of our spiritual disposition, intimately related to all of the reversals about which Luke speaks... but Luke is also challenging the status quo of our spiritual life, and I mean the spiritual life in the collective community... which well may be as dysfunctional as our social and economic paradigm.... In reality we can't separate them... everything is social and economic; everything is spiritual.

So this particular teaching, to Love your enemies, has deep roots in Hebrew scripture. You remember the story of Joseph. We just read an excerpt. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers; and he chooses to forgive them, which for the writer in Genesis, has redemptive and restorative ramifications well beyond just Joseph's family; because of this act of Love Egypt flourishes.... And

then there's the story of Jacob and Esau... Jacob defrauds Esau of his inheritance... and upon meeting again well after Jacob's being on the run to avoid his brother... Jacob is embraced by Esau, and forgiven, again restoring the viability of an entire people who must stick together if they are to survive. And of course, we read throughout Hebrew scripture and in New Testament literature the admonition to welcome the stranger, the foreigner, the alien among us. This is a recurring pattern in our sacred lore... one to which I think we have to pay close attention. There is something deep in the heart of our humanity, a great mystery that is manifest when we are practicing our skills of empathy... Plato said that to know oneself is to know God... Could it be possible that in seeking knowledge of the other, we might learn something of ourselves, something of God? Even something perhaps hidden from our view... something precious; something treasurable... something we need to know?

I think Luke here in his narrative of Jesus' sermon on the plain... is describing a pattern of being... a pattern that challenges our conventional thinking. Scholars call it a reversal... but I see it as a pattern. A pattern that refocuses our being in the world; a pattern juxtaposed upon our cultural biases and preconditions. There are reversals in the pattern, but the pattern is more.... This is Love's pattern. Luke is telling us that we are to Love as God loves; and he is

illustrating to us what Love looks like. In Love the hungry are fed, and the poor are raised up.... In Love there is equilibrium in the well-being of all people. Love belies disproportion. In Love everyone has the same social status, because we are all simply human, all made in God's image.... And it is for us to seek that image in the other... even in our enemies, perhaps mostly in our enemies... even in the ones we hate, perhaps mostly in the ones we hate... Empathy is at the heart of the matter... Empathy is the means of Love. Empathy is sacrifice for the good of the other.... Jesus on the cross is God's empathy with our human suffering... God's empathy with all the victims of this world... and to some extent we are all victims, because we all suffer... perhaps in empathizing with human suffering, God sees something new in Godself..... and that is why we Love our enemies; to see them... and to see ourselves.....to see their humanity and ours beyond mere posturing, beyond mere persona, even beyond malice... ultimately we are all suffering souls just trying to find some peace of mind, and some rest, and maybe the joy of meaning along the way... empathy.. 'to suffer with' in the Greek. That's what Love does: Love bears our collective suffering. And no one is left out of Love's panoramic lens, even the one's we fear, even the ones we hate.

This is not an admonition to do something that we can't do. This is an invitation to wake up to Love... and Love knows no boundaries. Love will not rest

until we are all brothers and sisters of the one God... As practical considerations: Just think of the wasted energy spent on hating someone. Think of the wasted energy on holding a grudge. Think of the wasted energy of resentment. Think of the damage we do to ourselves in being complicit with violence. We now are a people in this country who suffer far more than we realize from collective PTSD. There is no winning at war. We all lose. We glorify our so-called victories in WWI and WWII, but we are sorely wounded. We are not healed... humankind suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome because of violence perpetrated over the last six to seven millennia. We are being told to stop by the one we call the prince of peace. It is time to stop and let Love have a say. It is time for a new pattern.

That is not to say that we cease from the resistance to all that would oppress and abuse and shame. We are still called to seek justice and call out the hypocrisy of our world. We are to resist evil always... But brothers and sisters our predisposition is empathy. Empathy that makes room for Love... so that means in our political conversations for example (I'm preaching to myself) to have patience with the other; know that they have doubts like you... have the courage to consider another point of view (even if you are sure you're right) you may not be... We've heard Paul speak of such a practice. And Paul's onto the pattern... Love is patient... love is kind... love is not arrogant...love is not jealous... love is

not rude... Love doesn't insist on the upper hand... Love does not store up grievances... Love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth... Love always makes allowances to the other... and Love trusts, and Love endures.

This is a pattern... which is a practice... It is a pattern for maturing Christians to follow. This is spirituality rooted in Love. If our lives are not founded in Love then they are not lives. Love is wider, more grown up than our petty divisions, our wars, our resentments. I wish I had been mature enough some 18 years ago to debate with my dear friend Tad with the predisposition of Love. We wouldn't have lost so much valuable time between us over the years. I just wasn't on to the pattern. For the world's sake we have to be about the pattern. The pattern of Love. Dear friends, Love your neighbor, even your hated enemy... that is the way you'll love God, and that is the way you'll love yourself... Empathy... that's where we start.