

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany: Love & Mercy
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May I speak to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Love your enemies.

Enemies. It is a funny word to us today. Sometimes we may think of enemies like a group of people geographically or ideologically. Russia could be interpreted as an enemy. Democrats and Republicans could be enemies. More personally enemies could include friends, family members, bosses, co-workers.

Conceptually enemy is a strong word. Here in the Greek, an enemy is someone or a group that is hostile to us, hating us, opposing us. A bunch of negative emotion coming at us to hurt and harm us (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance).

For some of us enemy by that definition may sound like an extreme label of personal relationship that really does not apply. We do not feel like we have enemies. For others of us, unfortunately, we have had personal relationships where people were or are enemies to us: hostile, hating, opposing.

Remember, the last time I was with you, the 'church' people, were filled with rage and tried to kill Jesus. Enemies. Jesus had enemies and so did those who followed Jesus. It was dangerous business to hang around with Jesus.

A part of what is important in this phrase "love your enemies" is to make sure we hear what Jesus is not saying. Jesus is not saying let your enemies harm you. He is saying

agape love them. Some of us may think that love means allowing ourselves to be abused. But that is not true.

Today we hear Jesus exhorting his followers to relate to enemies – to love them, last time I was with you, we saw Jesus leave the place his enemies were. It was dangerous so he left. He did not let his enemies harm him. Love and self-protection or healthy relating existing together.

In this passage there are two clear directives and a key concept that can guide us in loving our enemies – really in loving anyone - in the midst of one particular repetitive word. The repetitive word, no surprise, is love.

Love. It is always agape love here in this passage, as we saw before with I Corinthians 13 love.

And as we saw before, this love is always at the same time both unconditional and committed to truth. The both/and of love and truth helps us have the boundaries for not allowing others to harm us while we love them.

The first directive is verse 31 – “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

We see here the truth that we are really connected to each other. Created to be at union with one another. This phrase echoes Jesus’ teaching: “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Valarie Kaur [Core], civil rights lawyer and activist, in her book *Seen No Stranger*, opens this up further for us. She writes: “What has been an ancient spiritual truth is now

increasingly verified by science: We are all indivisibly part of one another. We share a common ancestry with everyone and everything on earth. The air we breathe contains atoms that have passed through the lungs of ancestors long dead...We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say – as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: ‘You are a part of me I do not yet know’ (p. 11).”

This quote looks back and is fascinating to consider, but in our Christian paradigm, we must also look forward. Be mindful of where we are going – and prepare for it. We will, in ways that I’m sure will be startling, for all eternity be at union with one another. Once we are rid of these fallen bodies and free from sin, in glory, this union will be without limitation forever.

We can see very concretely that how I treat you becomes in a very real way how I treat myself. We are connected. My neighbor is me. I am my neighbor. This informs our love of enemy and informs us if we happen to be the enemy.

A key concept communicated repetitively before the next directive is that love is not about reciprocity. What do I get back? So, without expectation of getting the same back or more of the same – the examples Jesus uses here are: love, do good, and lend. Agape love is generous. It involves both action and motivation. Jesus contrasts by placing the actions of love, goodness, and lending with the phrase “even sinners” do these actions well. Even sinners. In the Greek he is saying, even people who are super-duper devoted to their sinfulness can love, do good, and lend. The motivation, the heart matters in addition to actions.

It is easy in a way to appeal to behavior. Stop it. Do it. But appealing to the heart motivation is challenging.

It is here Jesus connects our ability to love back to God. He appeals to God's nature and love toward us in the second directive – the end of verse 35 and verse 36: “for [God] is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as [God] is merciful.”

If we look at how God relates to us individually it may motivate us to love others in the same way. It is a really effective way to even the playing field when we might be thinking about what someone else deserves and become aware of ourselves personally and God - what we might deserve but do not receive. But we do receive mercy from God.

Mercy.

D. E. Garland, in his article on Mercy in the Bromiley Bible Encyclopedia captures the breadth and depth of this word: Mercy, he writes, is the “deep, tender feeling of compassion that [is] awakened by the trouble, weakness, suffering, or vulnerability of another in need of help.” (Vol. 3, p. 322). Let me read that again- and think about how God relates to us and how we relate to others: Mercy is the “deep, tender feeling of compassion that [is] awakened by the trouble, weakness, suffering, or vulnerability of another in need of help.”

Mercy is deep emotion but in motion – it is feeling and action.

God has an emotional response to us. Relates to us on an emotional level.

If we are to be merciful as God is merciful, we too are to relate in ways that involve our emotions. It is necessary to mercy. All of our person engages in this Christian faith as we relate to one another, to God and to ourselves.

A further consideration from this passage, which is interesting to consider, is that in this life there will be enemies. It is a part of our now. We live in a fallen world with fallen relationships, fallen social systems. Enemies are here because sin is here. The good news is that enemies will not be with us for eternity. In glory comes complete freedom from sin, perfect understanding of one another. Unlimited grace for one another.

Love your enemies – love everyone really.

Jesus here gives us helps along the way. Teaching us how relating happens in the kingdom of God. Instructions for relating when it is hard or demanding.

We are challenged as we continue to hear about this crazy and amazing agape love. We see it is not only action but motivation and involves our emotions. We also glean a smidge about this eternal design of connection to one another.

May we love with God's love. Practice generosity without reciprocity. Walk in awareness of our connection to one another and show mercy, for God shows us mercy.

Amen.