

Epiphany 7C

Luke 6:27-38

Sunday, February 20, 2022

A few years back I participated in a portion of the Yom Kippur service--The Day of Atonement--at Temple Augudath Sholom here in Stamford. A friend invited me, and it was a memorable experience. Perhaps even more memorable, however, was walking into the building itself. I passed a police cruiser parked in the circle drive of the temple, and then passed a police officer with a bullet proof vest in front of the main entrance. It was clear that worship at Augudath Sholom was an altogether different reality than praying at St. Francis.

This past week the phrase that confirms the differing realities between Augudath Sholom and St. Francis--*Christian Privilege*--was referenced twice in separate situations. Perhaps it was a sign. Serendipity. Certainly something to pay attention to. Whatever the case, the phrase seems fitting for our text from Luke today. A troubling text, no doubt. Who among us doesn't do a double take when we hear phrases like:

- 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;
- 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's enough to make you think that you shouldn't read the Bible literally anymore. Jesus can't *really* be saying such things. Can he? More to the point, he can't *really* mean such things. Can he? The world does not operate this way. It's impossible to live this way. If we follow such teachings all we do is become a doormat. Furthermore, what do we do with instances like police protection for synagogues? Are they to love their enemy as well? Those who would try and destroy their worship and their people? Thus, the text is thrown into stark relief, and we should all feel a bit uncomfortable.

Indeed, we must be careful not to read this text in such a way as to condone or--God forbid--encourage people to stay in violent relationships or abusive scenarios. Jesus certainly is not promoting this. Yet, what he does espouse is a radical departure from what many of us consider normative engagement in the world. And Christianity's privilege down through the centuries, married as it was with political power for so long, perhaps inures us to such a radical way of being. Even today, there are those who believe that Jesus's message is about power and control rather than redemptive and gracious love.

For many in our world, they generally follow the dictum known as *Lex Talionis*, or the law of retribution. An eye for an eye. Interestingly, *Lex Talionis* was itself an evolution in human development around revenge and violence. It replaced disproportionate revenge. If someone killed a member of your family prior to *Lex Talionis*, the practice might be for the victim to wipe out his or her enemies whole family. The law of retribution created parameters for revenge. Not the entire family. Just equal retribution. An eye for an eye.

Jesus, however, does away with such thinking. The ante is raised. The stakes are made much higher. And far from being a doormat, Thomas Merton helps us to consider the complexity of what Jesus may be inviting us into. Merton writes:

Lord, help me not to be too quick to assume my enemy is a savage just because he is my enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks I am a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of me because he feels that I am afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed I were capable of loving him he would no longer be my enemy. Lord, help me not to be too quick to assume my enemy is a savage just because he is my enemy.

Lord, help me not to be too quick to assume that my enemy is an enemy of God just because he is my enemy. Perhaps he is my enemy precisely because he can find nothing in me that gives glory to God. Perhaps he fears me because he can find nothing in me of God's love and God's kindness and God's patience and mercy and understanding of the weaknesses of men. Lord, help me not to be too quick to assume that my enemy is an enemy of God just because he is my enemy.

Lord, help me not to be too quick to condemn the man who no longer believes in God, for it is perhaps my own coldness and avarice, my mediocrity and materialism, my sensuality and selfishness that have killed his faith. Lord, help me not to be too quick to condemn the man who no longer believes in God. Amen

What Jesus lays bare in his new law of love rather than retribution is the baseness within all of our hearts. None of us is pure, and none of us can even know completely that we are abiding by God's laws. With such limited knowledge and limited control, we certainly should not be judge, jury, and executioner of those with whom we disagree. Of course, we will use structures and force within the world for the furthering of society. We have laws, police, judges, juries, and there will be punishment meted out in what we hope is just and fair. Yet, Jesus calls us to a much more rigorous engagement with the world. Love.

He does so, of course, not as an aloof bystander or immune participant. He creates a law of love that he then fulfills. The whole of his life, ministry, and certainly his death, are an embodiment of what he teaches. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. His last days are a model for us of what the world will do to

those who love in such a way, as well as a model for how to love in the way that he commands. It is not for the faint of heart. It is, however, for the transformation of the world. Again, Thomas Merton:

Do not think that you can show your love for Christ by hating those who seem to be his enemies on earth... Suppose they really do hate him: nevertheless he loves them, and you cannot be united with him unless you love them too.

If you hate the enemies of the Church instead of loving them, you too will run the risk of becoming an enemy of the Church, and of Christ; for he said: Love your enemies, and he also said: He that is not with me is against me. Therefore if you do not side with Christ by loving those that he loves, you are against him.

But Christ loves all people. Christ died for all people. And Christ said there was no greater love than that a man should lay down his life for his friend.