

Remembrance Sunday

November 7, 2010

Luke 6:20-31

“Loving Our Enemies”

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Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

But I say to you that listen, 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.”

“But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” These are difficult words to hear from Jesus, a challenging call any day. They are especially challenging commands this morning, and this week, when we remember those who gave of themselves in wars and conflicts long past, as well as those who are doing so even now, today.

With Canadian peacekeepers currently serving in places like Haiti and Cote d’Ivoire, the Congo and Sudan, the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia, as well as our active military troops in Afghanistan, war is not a long ago and far away prospect, but one that touches many Canadians whose loved ones serve. And each of these places have their own complexities, with so many areas of grey, and little that seems black and white. How then are we to heed Jesus’ command to love our enemies, and do good to those who hate us?

It is easier, perhaps, to deal with such a question when it comes to our own personal lives and circumstances. Jesus’ call to love our enemies seems more practical and achievable when we apply it to how we should behave within our own communities or families or workplaces; places where, even if injustice happens, it rarely involves the risk of bodily harm or death. It is when we attempt to apply Jesus’ command to a much bigger picture, to the relations within and among peoples and nations, that the call to love our enemies can stump us.

I suppose that is why the Christian church has developed two traditions when it comes to the prospect of war, both having roots in the earliest forms of Christianity. The first tradition is the smaller one, the tradition of Christian pacifism. In this tradition, the commandment God gives in Exodus, that “you shall not kill,” and Jesus’ commandment to “love your enemies”

trumps all other concerns. Christian pacifists believe that it is simply incompatible with Christianity to repay evil for evil, and that it is always better and more faithful to suffer oneself than to cause suffering in another.

This seems a faithful and simple response to Jesus' call for us to love our enemies, for whatever "loving our enemies" fully means, it has to at least mean not hurting or killing them. But for many, the Christian pacifist position falls short as soon as we seek to apply it to more complex situations. Even if we, as an individual, a people or a nation, could choose non-retaliation or non-escalation if we ourselves were attacked...what happens when our neighbours turn to violence against each other, or against their own peoples?

Then, the command to love our enemies becomes more complicated, because we are also called in Scripture to love our neighbours, to love them as we love ourselves. And we are commanded in Scripture to ensure that justice is done for those who are marginalized: the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the alien, the oppressed. How then are we to balance both the call to non-violence, and the call to love our neighbours and promote their well-being?

Well, it is the second Christian tradition that tries to achieve this balance. Called 'Just War Theory', it has its roots in the philosophy of the Roman senator Cicero, but was further developed by Christians like Augustine in the fourth century. Augustine believed that war was permissible, but only to defend against an unjust attack on your neighbor and not to defend yourself. By the medieval period, the tradition had evolved, eventually finding it permissible to use violence to defend yourself, but only because by defending yourself, you are indirectly defending others who depend upon you for their survival.

'Just War Theory' lays out a number of conditions for a military action to be considered a "legitimate defense", including: serious prospects of success; all other means of resolution having been tried and failed; the damage being inflicted by the aggressor being lasting, grave and certain; and the use of force not producing "evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated." And, the theory also includes some conditions about the way the military action may be conducted in order to be considered just. [the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, para. 2309]

I suppose you could call the Christian pacifist position "the ideal" and the Just War position, "the reality." Yet both are faithful and carefully thought, and prayed-through positions. Certainly Christians of all times and places have lived out their commitment to Jesus' way of non-violence, serving their country as conscientious objectors or sometimes, being persecuted for their belief. And other, equally devout and faithful Christians have felt the need to take up arms, even while fervently wishing it was not necessary. Believing that Jesus' words about turning the other cheek and giving up your shirt along with your coat might be practical, though demeaning, in the case of an individual, but are too impractical and ineffective, in the case of peoples and nations.

But, a Christian pacifist might say, we aren't called to be practical, or effective. We're called to be faithful, faithful to the God who formed us, gives us life and loves us. Faithful to the God of redemption, the God of compassion, the God that is love and that can only love. And,

they might say, loving and serving God with all our heart and all our soul means focusing our entire selves on the love of God, on being the love of God which is utterly incompatible with violence of any kind, but which is expressed non-violently by standing with others in the face of their oppression.

But, the Christian Just War theorist might say, the love of God is not sentimental, not love spelled “I-u-v,” not limited to a feeling. God’s love finds expression in concrete acts and takes on the character of justice, passion, avid commitment and zeal. In a situation of violence or oppression, they might say, God’s love must be expressed and embodied and lived in justice, in setting the oppressed free and relieving the suffering of those who are being hurt and killed. Intervening on behalf of those who are being traumatized is an expression of God’s love, even if it has to be expressed through military force. This is, in fact, the current policy of the United Church of Canada, which has endorsed the United Nations’ position called “The Responsibility to Protect,” which states that nations have a responsibility to intervene when peoples are being harmed. Yet, as you can imagine, many developing nations are suspicious that this will be used by western countries to serve their own interests, rather than the peoples of the nations they invade.

You might have guessed by now that I don’t have the answer, and maybe nobody does. The question I keep coming back to, that Jesus confronts us with over and over again, is how we are to love our enemies, those who want to hurt us. And how we are to love our neighbours who suffer from their own enemies. Are we to love them by staying out of their way, out of their countries, out of their wars? It sure didn’t feel like it after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when we realized too late that our inaction, despite being begged and pleaded for the head peacekeeper, Canadian Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire, resulted in the death almost a million civilians.

Then, does God call us to intervene with arms when some of our neighbours are oppressing others of our neighbours? Is that the best way to love our enemies and love our neighbours? We have troops in Afghanistan who believe that is just what they are up to. That they are helping the people of Afghanistan to have a better life. To support the efforts of the Afghan people to restore a democratic and legitimately elected government. To make tangible the care and compassion of neighbouring nations. And in their efforts to do that they are engaged in combat with others who do not want them there, who are trying to kill them, and who are succeeding too often.

I don’t know the answer, but I believe that as Christians we are called to ask, and keep asking the question, of ourselves, and of our country: how we are to balance the call to love our enemy, and the call to love our neighbour and ensure justice for those in need. I do know that we are accountable to and carried by God, and only God. And that God is love. I know that we are called both to love our neighbours, and our enemies, as ourselves. Perhaps when we come to recognize that God’s love encompasses all creation, that God’s love encompasses even our enemies, we will at least slow down in our rush to declare black and white, right and wrong.

Walt Whitman has written, "For my enemy is dead, a man as divine as myself is dead." Perhaps when we believe that, when we truly believe that, we will know what is right and what is wrong. When we can only love, when we are motivated only by love and not vengeance, not fear, not scarcity, only then will we know our motives are pure and our actions are just. We have a long way to go, but in love we are led.

In the end, love is our commandment and our call. It is the only orientation that we can faithfully follow, and the only scale that will help us somehow measure right from wrong, just war from oppressive violence. May the God who is love give us the depth and the grace, the patience and the wisdom to seek it out, and the courage to live within it. Amen.