

The Sixth Sunday in Epiphany
February 11, 2018

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

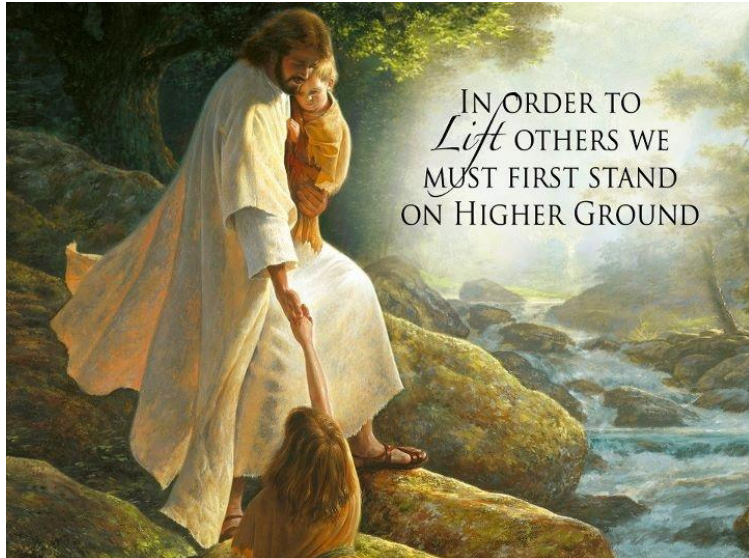
Exodus. 23: 4-5

Luke 6: 27-36

The Kingdom of God is Within

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to take the upcoming sabbatical...and anticipate that the time away will be meaningful for all of us. I ask you to pray for me in this time

and for all those who will be supporting me and Woods Church while I am gone. I ask you to pray for Susan. :)



In three weeks I begin a 3-month essentially academic sabbatical in Budapest, Hungary and Ukraine. There I will combine my love for my Hungarian heritage and this community with a growing sense of wanting/ needing to write something (a book, an article, a paper) that may make a contribution to my '60's indoctrination about the urgency for peace in this world/unity of living and purpose for all....and the quest for peace within individuals, especially our young people in Severna Park who too often have experienced depression and anxiety which, as we all know too well, has sometimes resulted tragically in attempted and/or completed suicide. While this may not sound like "rest" to some, it feeds my soul, and I look forward to the challenge.

The sabbatical work has two lenses: biblical theology and psychology, and is entitled, "The Kingdom of God Within: Oppression, Resilience and Survival." I will be using some experiences of survivors of the Communist occupation of Hungary (my own family included), and considering the things that allowed them to keep going/living in the face of that oppression. I believe that their stories of resilience, drawn from their faith, may have some valuable insight and instruction for all of us who face challenges in our lives and struggle with how to keep going/living. Finding that Kingdom of God within is critical and key for anyone, whether the challenge is the loss of family members to totalitarian systems and regimes, or the sense of futility and failure when not meeting real or perceived expectations imposed on us by family, school, or friends who bully others. While differing drastically in terms of intensity perhaps, both situations hold in common the paralyzing influence of fear and a profound sense of loss of

freedom to escape the oppressive pain. External or internal, the result is a need for refuge and safety and a reliable way of coping. Enter, the Kingdom of God and the gospel message.

Today's scripture message suggests an important/essential requirement for developing resilience in the face of that which challenges or threatens us. Having a faith that leads us to discovering and leaning on that Kingdom of God within enables not just an earthly survival, but demonstrates a spiritual maturity that may only come from belief in God. Central to both is Jesus' conviction that we must love our enemies, and it is on that aspect of the Kingdom of God that we focus this morning.

Loving our enemy is a real problem for us...at least it is for me. I have an impossible time with the horrid things we are capable of doing to each other. An impossible time fathoming my great uncles being led out of their hometown of Pálo, Hungary to camps in Siberia, where they eventually died. An impossible time hearing the stories of bullying in a community, until a 7th grader thinks the only way out is to die and, so, in a last ditch effort to find friends, lets her friends vote on whether or not she should go through with it. They vote in the affirmative. An impossible time actually just reading the news each day with its reports of violence, terrorism and hatred. And while we all know the importance of forgiveness, in the face of an offense or injury, particularly one that affects someone we love, the feelings of hate and the desire for revenge are inevitable.

Do you recall the recent news report of the father whose two daughters finished their testimonies against the gymnasts' doctor accused, and now convicted, of child abuse who then asked the judge if he might speak. Granted that permission he asked for five minutes alone in a room with the doctor. "I cannot allow that sir," the judge responded. "Then how about one minute," the father pushed. "Sir, you know I cannot do that," came the reply. At which point the father lunged at the doctor and had to be restrained by court authorities. As they led him away, he yelled, "What if these had been your daughters?!" We can all resonate with that, and with a deep reaction that wants to retaliate. And, in a situation like this, what does loving one's enemy mean?

I would remind us that loving our enemies does not mean in any way that we condone, forget or accept the wrong done but, rather that we surrender ourselves to God...God's way and God's justice. We do have a responsibility, in fact, to see to it that violence, hatred, abuse, etc. are not repeated.

In his book, "Strength to Love," Martin Luther King includes a sermon about loving one's enemies. He emphasizes that there is a difference between loving and liking. It is not likely that we will like the ones who have harmed us. But it is possible, following Jesus' mandate to love all of God's people/neighbor/ stranger alike, to love our enemies as God's children. Second, it is important to believe that there is some element of goodness that may be found in even the worst enemy...and to look for it. And, third we must find a way to maintain the capacity to forgive...not forget but to forgive. Forgiveness is initiated by the person who has been wronged, and it is the way we move on...not ignoring what has happened, but removing its power from being that

which defines who we are. Finally, we do not seek revenge or retaliation, for that is God's job. Instead we attempt to walk in God's way, seeking good will for all people.

Probably you have your own stories...stories of people who have overtly harmed or betrayed you. Situations of unfairness or injustice where you have felt victimized or punished unfairly. And perhaps you still hold those wounds and the accompanying resentment so close to the bone, that something that may have occurred long ago, can resurface as though it happened last week. And maybe it did happen last week.

Instinctively we want to strike back at bullies, infidelity, terrorism, abuse.... the list is a long one. We want them all to feel the same pain—as though that will ease our own. But, “resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies,” warned Nelson Mandela, South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, politician and philanthropist who served as president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. The first black person to hold that office.

Twenty eight years ago to this day, February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from an unjust 27 year term in prison, and immediately began what would be a triumphant mission around South Africa preaching a message of reconciliation and defiance. As best I can tell, Mandela lived out what Jesus mandated: that we should love our enemies...that we should override our instinctual response to hate what or who has hated us, to seek revenge upon anyone who has harmed us or those we love, and to choose to vindicate the wrongs done through acts of violence or abuse or any other kind of oppression. Override those instincts to take revenge and replace them with feelings of love for our enemies. In Mandela's own words, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Love *does* come more naturally to us, I think, because as ones created in the image of God, whose very nature is that of love, we have imprinted that nature into our own. God's love is eternal, unquenchable and unimaginably expansive and inclusive.

You will recall several weeks back that Susan shared with us an example of God's boundless, limitless love by using a story from the Hebrew/Jewish Midrash (ancient rabbinical commentaries and tales about scripture) in which angels gather at the Red Sea in celebration of Moses' parting the waters so that the Israelites successfully flee the Egyptians. God walks by and sees the angels doing a kind of victory dance because, when the last of the Israelites had made it safely across the dry sea bed, the waters returned to their place drowning all of the Egyptians. While the angels rejoice over the demise of the Israelites' enemies, God weeps with the words, “Those Egyptians were my children too.” Well, I don't think it stops with that noble sentiment, for if we are to bear and carry out the imprint of God's love, we must be able to adopt an attitude like that of God's, wherein even one's worst enemies are tended and cared for. That process of rising above one's own suffering is critical to coping and being resilient, and, without it, we do not survive...certainly mentally and often, not mortally.

Did you like the Old Testament reading for today? A little easier reading than what we've just been processing, so I thought I'd call it to your attention here. The passage is known as a universal parable; that is, its meaning is more far reaching and profound than just what is being literally described. Listen to it again...Exodus 23: vs 4-5: *"When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free."*

Much of what we read in New Testament parables mirrors OT stories. We are quickly reminded of the story of the Good Samaritan and the importance of not passing by someone who is in need...even if that person is a despised or "unclean" one.

The prospect of having the impulse much less the ability to overcome feelings of fear and/or anger/outrage in order to rescue or assist someone we would identify as "enemy" is challenging to say the least. Following the bombing at the Boston Marathon years ago, I was on the phone with my daughter, who lives in Cambridge, as she "stayed in place" in her apartment on Mass Ave. while just miles down the road the remaining bomber hid under the cover of a boat in a resident's backyard. Years later she herself would run the marathon both as a demonstration that she could, and in defiance of a forever fear that it could happen again. At the time, after the death of the first bomber, cemeteries in the area refused burial for the body. Paul Douglas Keane, a retired schoolteacher in Connecticut, offered a plot next to his mother's grave saying, "This person, I don't care what a pariah he is...it is the right thing to do....and in honor of my mother who did teach me to love my enemy." Others would make similar offers for the same religious reasons. Eventually, the bomber was buried in a plot in Virginia...given by a Methodist woman who said she was motivated by her own faith and because Jesus had said to love your enemies.

Could you/we do that? Could we love our enemies enough to do for them what we would want done for ourselves? Even if it were really personal? And, even more importantly, what does it take to do so?

Clearly it takes a faith that instructs us in the importance of love as the overriding authority on everything. It takes holding tight to a faith and that Kingdom of God within us, where that same love is in charge. There we discover the truth about hate: that hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Martin Luther King said that when you are faced with an enemy/an oppression, you only have three choices: 1) rise up against them in physical violence which will only create more social problems than it solves; 2) give in and give up—become resigned to your situation...the problem there is that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good; 3) the only way...is that way of love which is non-violent but still strong in its resistance to evil. Love is powerful and it is redemptive. Abraham Lincoln once declared when responding to criticism for saying kind words about the South, "Don't I destroy my enemies if I make them my friends?"

Upon what does building your life depend in the face of challenge...in the face of those we would define as enemies? If it's not love...love of those same enemies...then we are doomed. If

we don't live our lives God's way, then we will remain oppressed, depressed, anxious, and just outside the Kingdom of God; and evil and hatred will have their way.

I may offer a homework assignment for this week:

- 1) Make a list of those whom you consider to be your "enemies"...this should be easy.
- 2) Consider the harm they have caused you...another easy part.
- 3) Consider how you have or have not used your access to the Kingdom of God within you to survive it and move on.

- 4) And, finally, (a really difficult part) consider how you might go about loving and praying for that enemy.

Friends, it is not easy but it is the only way. For love is the only creative, redemptive, transforming power in the universe.