

## Love Your Enemies

So often we are told that we must love our enemies. It doesn't really make sense at first blush to love someone who would harm us or even wish us dead, does it? And yet, it is a commandment from God. Nowhere in scripture will we read the words "like everyone", no we are commanded to Love everyone, which means we don't necessarily have to like everyone and for which I am eternally grateful.

The Psalm for today, psalm 31, was written approximately 445 BCE. It is filled with images of pleading, salvation and protection. It is the psalm which Jesus referred to when he pleaded, from the cross "into your hands I commend my spirit", whereupon he breathed his last breath and died. The language is that of comfort in the arms of a protector, one for whom the author yearns.

In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge  
Incline your ear to me  
Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,  
for you are my crag and my stronghold  
you are my tower of strength.

I must admit to taking some liberties with the reading from Acts today. The lectionary uses a much smaller section of the reading, yet I thought it something to highlight, and so I added much more of the story of Stephen.

If you wish to read the full story, I commend Acts 6 and 7. In Acts 6 we read of the Arrest of Stephen, in Acts 7 there is the full speech of Stephen which holds no punches in his reckoning of the Sanhedron and those in authority. Finally there is the Stoning of Stephen in which we receive the first glance at a young man named Saul, who would eventually become known as Paul.

Stephen was a bright young deacon in the Church who was unafraid to hold those in authority to account. He was loved by everyone and as such was seen as a threat to those in authority. And in typical reactionary fashion, a few witnesses were "planted" who said they overheard Stephen speaking in blasphemous ways about Moses and God. And the crowd, whipped into a frenzy, decided that Stephen needed to be brought to account for his heretical ways.

Sound like any other story we may have heard recently?

Stephen was very aware of the teachings of Jesus and believed fully in Jesus' message of love and inclusion. So much so that Stephen understood that one day Jesus would return and hold to account all those who had abused his teachings.

It could be said that Stephen was the first to understand and speak of Jesus' return to earth. Stephen was a charismatic speaker, a hard worker and one who was devoted to the causes of widows and orphans. He worked hard for the Church as an advocate and mediator on behalf of the poor. Stephen, even today, is held up as an example of what a Deacon is in the Church. A helper. An advocate. A mediator.

Fun fact – the Order of Deacons is older than the order of Priests/Ministers in the Church. Bishops were the first of the holy orders and when it was discovered that there was too much work for a Bishop to do alone, Deacons were recruited to help with the day to day burdens to free up the Bishop's somewhat. The order of Presbyters or Priests/Ministers came up a century or so later.

And yet, in the structure of Holy Orders, for the Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches, one is first ordained to the Holy Order of Deacons. Some candidates remain as Deacons for their entire ministry and are known as Vocational or Permanent Deacons. Others are known as Transitional Deacons while awaiting ordination to the Priesthood, which can last from a few months to several years depending on the location and circumstances of ordination. A Bishop may only be elected or appointed from the college of priests or presbyters. A Bishop must be a priest or presbyter before they can be a Bishop.

Now back to Stephen – As Stephen is hearing all this evidence laid against him, it is noted that "all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel". (Acts 6.15, NRSV) The high priest next asks Stephen if the charges brought against him are true and Stephen replies. My goodness does Stephen reply!

He tells of Abraham witnessing the glory of God when he was in Mesopotamia, he spoke of Abraham's move from the Chaldeans to Haran and how he was promised descendants as multitudinous as the stars in the skies, even though at the time, Abraham had no children. Stephen spoke of God's judgment and demands that God be worshiped. Stephen spoke also about the covenant of circumcision.

Stephen then gives a refresher on the hierarchy of Abraham's family from Isaac to Jacob to the twelve Patriarchs. The jealousy of the patriarchs against Joseph and his subsequent sale into slavery. The story of the famine in the land, of Pharaoh and of Joseph's reunion with his brothers.

Next Stephen tells the story of Moses, how he was hidden at birth and eventually adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her own. He tells the story of Moses wanting to visit his family, and in seeing his Israelite family being mistreated he struck and killed an Egyptian. The next day, while attempting to intercede in an argument he realised there was a witness to the killing and he fled to Midian.

He has two sons and about forty years later a fire appeared over a burning bush that the fire did not consume. Through that message, God told Moses that he was to remove his sandals for the ground where he stood was holy. He was to take God's message to Egypt and demand the release of the Israelites held captive by Pharaoh.

He negotiates with Pharaoh, proves he is God's agent and is allowed to take the Israelites, who upon tramping through the desert become unhappy with the situation and wish they had stayed within captivity. There's the parting of the Red Sea, more complaining and then finally receiving the ten commandments, which have been broken from the very beginning they were given.

Having warmed up sufficiently, Stephen refers to those who have charged and surrounded him as "stiff-necked people" which is not likely to endear him to them. He is reminding them that for thousands of years, the people in authority have never hearkened to the message of the Holy Spirit. They have continuously used God's laws to twist the laws of the land and persecute the innocent.

Stephen holds no punches and when he has finished his oratory, he is stoned to death by the crowd which surrounds him. They each take off their robes in order to have better arm action, apparently. And they lay their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul who did not participate in the stoning, yet says at the end of the stoning "And Saul approved of their killing him." (Acts 8.1, NRSV)

Stephen accepts his punishment, going so far as to plead with God to receive his spirit. Very much in the same way as Jesus, Stephen was an advocate at the very end, even pleading with God "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7.60, NRSV)

Again, remind you of another recently heard story?

Jesus was an innocent who wanted those in authority to change their ways in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven. His message was so radical that the jealous backroom cretans decided he had to die and lied in order to secure his fate.

Stephen was an innocent who wanted those in authority to change their ways in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven. His message was so radical that the jealous backroom cretans decided he had to die and lied in order to secure his fate.

Both men were charged with blasphemy. Neither were guilty.

Both men died in horrible ways. Neither deserved their punishment.

Both men chose to forgive those who had them killed, and even interceded with God on their behalf.

That's a lot of love to give.

Now, thankfully, I don't think my enemies want me to be killed. I'm grateful for that. Yet being called to love them? I don't think I'm capable of that.

And yet, we all know that love is difficult, right? Just look at the rates of divorce in North America and Europe and you'll see that love is difficult.

And yet, people continue to marry. I have two weddings this year; one in August and one in September.

People who are married or in committed partnerships, please back me up. Being married is hard work. Every day you need to choose to stay with the one you have chosen. Every day you need to navigate the large and small issues in which you live. Does he put the cap on the toothpaste properly? Does she load the dishwasher properly? Does he do a chore when he's asked to or when he feels like it? Does she ask once or nag repeatedly?

Marriage is hard work and yet, for many, they make it work because they are committed to putting in the hard work.

How much energy do you spend on your enemies? To be honest, I don't really think about my enemies that much. Because when I do, I tend to get angry and frustrated. Do you know what I mean?

And yet, maybe if we loved our enemies, as in tried to see things from their perspective, or forgive them for the wrongs they have done to us, maybe that is what God means? To "Love Your Enemy" is to find it in your heart to put aside any wrongs, and to love them as a fellow human being. You don't have to love them like you love your parents or children or best friend.

The word love is complicated because there are many different kinds of love. When we are commanded to love our enemies it is to use an expression of agape love: the love that must be willed. We must use both our mind and reason, deliberately choosing to love our enemies.

It doesn't mean we become best friends. It means we see them as fellow human beings. It does not mean we are to like them, or to pretend that there is no friction or strife between us. We can love while at the same time disliking. Ask any parent of a tantruming toddler or surly teen.

Perhaps if we chose to love our enemies, it would open our hearts to better understanding? Perhaps if we all made a commitment to loving instead of hating we could make the world a better place?

I am not naive enough to believe that if we all hold hands and sing Kumbaya that the world will cease to be, at times, really awful. However, I am naive enough to believe that if we all choose to do so, to lead with love, instead of with hate, we can transform this world into the kingdom of God.

A place where everyone is welcome and all are equal. Where the only "rule" is to love first. The rest we can figure out through conversation, relationship and manners. I believe that we are capable of infinite love. Love for our family. Love for our God. Love for our children. Love for our friends. Love for each other. And even love for our enemies.

This life can be really difficult. Sometimes it can seem that there is much more darkness than light. Even at the Coronation of King Charles III yesterday there were protesters screaming "Not My King". And yet, we stand at the threshold of a new coronated King and Queen. Defender of the faith for the Worldwide Anglican Communion, while also committed to understanding and relationship with all world faiths.

Something historic happened yesterday. King Charles III committed himself as defender of the faith, as well as to support all faiths in the world. A new dawn on a new understanding of cooperation.

Such as Jesus asked God to forgive his enemies. Just as Stephen asked God not to hold his enemy's sins against them, we are called to do the same. Thankfully not while we are being stoned or crucified!

Giving thanks to God from whom all blessings flow.  
Let the Church say, "Amen!" Alleluia!!

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent  
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry  
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Sermon for Easter 5 – 7 May 2023  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, Acts 6.8-15, 7.1, 51-60