

Pentecost 3, Year A
Matthew 10:24-39
June 25, 2017
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Among the several coincidences of my life is one we all encounter today. The Gospel text for the first sermon I preached as the lay vicar of St. Alban's Church in Redmond, Oregon in August of 1980 included Luke's version of the text we have before us this morning from Matthew's gospel. That sermon in 1980 was not the first one I had ever preached, nor, doubtless, will this be the last, but as it happens, my career in active pastoral ministry begins and ends with Jesus speaking to us of the division, strife, hostility, that comes from faith in Jesus.

Then and now these words prompted the same question in me. Why should a person whose fundamental message is love cause such division? After all, we know that "what the world needs now is love, sweet love; it's the only thing that there's just too little of." We also know "love is all you need," and we have been exhorted to "come on people now, smile on your brother, everybody get together, try to love one another right now." Since my generation a thousand other songs have been written on the same theme. None of the folks who became famous because they sang these songs suffered because they sang them, nor have any of us who spent the hours of our youth singing along with these and other paeans to love, however off key we might have been. So why is Jesus,

the living incarnation of the love of God the source of division, strife, internecine warfare and death?

My answer then focused on devotion. But since then I realized that can't be all of it. Lots of people show tremendous devotion without getting persecuted. Families show great devotion to each other without trouble from the neighbors, and people who are fully devoted to music or other arts often become poor, but rarely hated. The issue is thus not devotion itself; the issue is what sort of person one becomes because of that devotion. That is the key to understanding both this passage, and the way its truth has emerged at various points in world history.

Lots of people, then and now, were and are devoted to Jesus. Those in any generation whose devotion become total experience a remarkable transformation; they become able to love as God loves, they love everyone fully and completely all the time. This is incomprehensible to most of us whose love emerges as a response to those people and things that affect us in ways we consider positive, but it became completely natural to those so transformed. As a result they went out into the world offering to the very people who killed Jesus a message of complete love and acceptance. Would you do that? Would you go to the people who killed your greatest hero with that sort of message? They went to their fellow Jews and declared that in Jesus we now realize God's love is equally offered to Gentiles as well as us, which made no sense to the Jews, just as saying God's love is not restricted to Christians makes no sense today to most

Christians. The Gentiles who fell under the spell of this love gave up the Hellenistic religion in which they had been raised for the sake of devoting themselves entirely to the one true God manifested in Jesus, which got them branded as anti-social and atheistic by Roman society.

All three of those things made the followers of Jesus look at least weird, and quite possibly dangerous to the bulk of the people. And where we see unconditional love manifested today the result is the same. Those of you who voted for Donald Trump, perhaps even participated in his campaign, go to a Trump rally with the message that you truly and deeply love Hillary Clinton; you respect her full human dignity, and you know God loves her as well. Alternatively, those who voted for Hillary, go a meeting of local Democrats with the same message about Donald Trump. You will not get far, and at least some of the people who hear such messages will get very angry with you. That is the sort of life into which people get led when they are transformed by the love of God shown forth in Jesus.

Will Campbell, in his wonderful autobiography *Brother to a Dragonfly*, recounted a time when he began a presentation to a liberal audience by saying "I love Klansmen." He got no further in his address; he was shouted down and thrown out of the room. Campbell had been invited to make the speech because he had a long history of fighting for basic human rights for black people in this country, and more than once had risked his own safety in that struggle. It didn't matter; to utter those words was enough to earn him the contempt of those who

had hitherto been his allies. It is hard to fault those people, for after all, the Klan, and those who fully supported Jim Crow were murdering people like those who were in the audience that day. The idea of loving Klansmen in the context of the Jim Crow South seemed not just stupid and ignorant, but truly evil. Yet, that is what being transformed by unconditional love will do to at least some of your relationships.

Conflict always accompanies the tangible manifestations of God's complete and unconditional love in this world. Those whose devotion leads them into a conditional sort of love simply can't understand, and ultimately will not abide a love that embraces all people everywhere. Most of us easily and naturally hate the people who hate us; those who tell us to love those who hate us and pray for those who persecute us are simply incomprehensible, and quite often perceived as dangerous, even when we know it was Jesus himself who uttered those fantastic and unbelievable words.

But it is those words, or rather the God who is behind them, and suffuses them with power, that transforms people in every generation. Today we are exposed to the cost of that love; we are made aware of what our subsequent history has proved, that complete and unconditional love brings strife and division. Indeed, the Church herself has struggled with this kind of love and mostly lost, for she too, as we know, as we have experienced in our own day, as often as not preaches conditional love, and has for most of her existence.

But in every generation some people have been transformed by the kind of love God manifested and made known in Jesus, and so God's love, and the Good News it brings, has never been lost, and never will be lost, for it comes from God ever and always. And it is Good News, in fact it is the Best News, for a world transformed by conditional love is always going to justify indifference and even hatred; it is always going to identify people who aren't worth loving. Only a love that finds everyone worth loving can ultimately bring true peace to the earth, only when that kind of love transforms the whole world will everyone be able to live together without fear. That time is a long way off.

It isn't enough to sing popular songs about love. No one ever changed the world by encouraging people to love what makes them feel good. What changes the world is that unconditional love so incomprehensible it first brings strife, division, and only later true peace.

In the meantime unconditional regard for everyone, even when we are declaring that what they are doing is wrong, perhaps horribly wrong, is the one thing we as the Church have to offer, for it is the one thing Jesus offered us in his life, his crucifixion and death, and his resurrection. To proclaim that message, and to live it out regardless of what it costs is the work of the Church; it is the work of this Cathedral. Manifesting that kind of love has always been the vocation of this good place, and always will be, regardless of who your dean and other leaders are, and who constitutes the larger membership of St. John's.

Well, I am deeply, deeply grateful to have been your Dean for nearly eleven years. You have changed me, and through you my relationship with God has grown and deepened. I will never be able to express adequately my gratitude to you all. But now it is time for something else for all of us, and so I finish this sermon with, as those of you who know me best might expect, a few words from the Grateful Dead family. The words are from *Cassidy*; the composer is John Perry Barlow. “Faring you well now, let your life proceed by its own design; nothing to tell now, let the words be yours, I’m done with mine.”