

The Image of Love
1 John 4:7-21
April 29, 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

In many ways, this sermon ties together the sermons of the last several weeks. You may remember that the Sunday after Easter we looked at the resurrection as Paul reported it in 1 Corinthians 15 where he says, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, [that is Adam], we will also bear the image of the man of heaven, [Jesus Christ].”(1 Cor 15:49) At that time, we turned back to that all important verse from Genesis: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”(Gen 1:27) I stated that there is truly a spark of the divine in each of us and in every human being. We are all created in the image of God. And so today, in the First Letter of John we read: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”(1 John 4:12-13) – the image of the man from heaven.

Last week, we considered the allegory of the sheep fold. Here Jesus declares that he is the Good Shepherd, the Shepherd calls the sheep by name and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. But Jesus goes on to say that there are other flocks, and he must lead them also; and, eventually, they will be joined together. There will be one flock and one shepherd. And so we considered the inclusivity of Jesus. Jesus did not come just for the Jews. Jesus did not die and rise again just for the Jews. No, Jesus lived and died and rose again for *all nations*, for all people of all races, all nationalities; and, yes, I’ll even say all religions. All means all – no exceptions. And so, here in John’s letter we read: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”(1 John 4:20-21)

And who is our brother and our sister? I think Jesus makes that pretty clear. Our brother or sister is the Samaritan who helps when others passed by, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman who would ask for healing for her daughter, the lepers from another country, the Jewish tax collector, those tortured by demons, a rich young ruler, and some humble fishermen. Our brothers and sisters are our friends and neighbors, but they are also those of other races, other religions, other nationalities. Our brothers and sisters are those of other sexual orientations, other ages, other cultures, other socio-economic levels. Yes, I believe that every other person on this planet is our brother or sister.

I was draft age during the Viet Nam War. I had a cousin that was drafted; and he reported to me how, during boot camp they used to march to a chant of “Kill the Kong, Kill the Kong.” I was in college at the time, and I fully understood

the concept of “demonizing the enemy.” It’s a form of brainwashing. The government must convince soldiers that the enemy is evil, otherwise no human could kill another human being. I was also very well aware that the Vietnamese were doing exactly the same thing to their soldiers. It’s the way war works.

Now understand, first of all, that I have the utmost respect and appreciation for our fighting men and women. They are doing a very difficult and dangerous job for the safety and security of our nation and our world. I also believe that there *is* such a thing as a “just war.” I believe World War II was a just war. My father fought in World War II. He was in the Battle of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge; and, while I have not yet substantiated it, I believe he was present at the liberation of the Death Camp at Dachau. I also know that the war took a very heavy toll on him.

All this having been said, I confess that I am a pacifist. When I considered that soldiers on both sides were being conditioned to kill their opponents; I thought, “How terrible.” Then, I received a “pre-induction notice.” That’s kinda like the government telling you to get ready to be drafted. And so I prayed. My prayer was simple, one line: “Lord, don’t let them make me an instrument of war.” My prayer was answered; the draft ended a few weeks after my pre-induction notice. I was never drafted.

Yes, I believe war is evil. Sadly, I also believe that war is sometimes necessary, so hear me again when I say that I very much appreciate the sacrifice that our men and women in uniform make for our country.

All this being said, it greatly saddens me to report that our enemies in war are not the only people that we sometimes demonize. It was just a few weeks ago that this country honored the 50th Anniversary of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was pleased to attend one of several special worship services in our area on the evening. Dr. King worked tirelessly to end racism in our country.

It was ten years after Dr. King’s death that I was touring the country giving concerts with a group of 35 musicians. We had two African-Americans in the group – one was a trumpet player and the other was a stage hand. We were in Pine Bluff, Arkansas when a group of musicians decided to go to a public swimming pool on their day off. The group was told that they were all welcome to swim, except the black trumpet player. If he would like, he could pick up the trash around the outside of the facility while he waited for his friends. A few weeks later we were in Morgan City, Louisiana, when a group entered a bar, including our stage hand. The African-American stage hand was told he was welcome to take a beer to-go; but he was not welcome to drink it on the premises. When he informed the bartender that was a violation of Federal Law, he was told that the bar really didn’t care about Federal Law, and it would be best for him if he didn’t make an issue of it. That was forty years ago, and I wish I could tell you that things are different today. But all you need to do is watch the news to know that

racism is alive and well in our country, and indeed, there are hate groups within these United States of America who are actively seeking to demonize children of God based solely on the color of their skin.

Still, as strongly as I feel about racism, I wish I could tell you that people are only demonized based on their race. But that's not true. I recently received e-mail from a group of that claimed to be Christian. The e-mail said, and I quote: "Progressive liberals worship abortion, same-sex intercourse and marriage, gun control, euthanasia, big government, transgendered bathrooms and coercive redistribution of wealth." unquote. I'm not sure who all is being demonized by that statement – certainly anyone who might claim to be progressive, and certainly all members of the LGBTQ community. That e-mail went on to demonize the 800,000 youth that recently participated in the "March for our Lives" march on Washington, DC.

Now, we as a society, have differing views on issues such as abortion, gun control, gay rights, and I respect that. I think that good, honest debate on these subject is healthy. But, as a progressive Christian, I tell you I only worship my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and I highly resent a significant group insinuating that I just because I call myself progressive, I "worship" certain issues or ideologies. I even more resent the demonizing of 800,000 young people for expressing their constitutional right to free speech and assembly. Where's the love for our brothers and sisters in all that?

I've stated before, that I'm even more distressed when our leaders in Government demonize certain groups. Undocumented immigrants in our country have been demonized. People seeking valid refugee status have been demonized. People of Muslim faith have been demonized. It seems that our government officials who claim to be Christian choose to ignore the Biblical mandate to welcome the stranger.

John states: "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." Love does not mean that we must agree with their every stand, but it does mean that we must not judge, condemn and demonize.

And then suddenly... suddenly, as I was writing this sermon, I was struck with the hardest task of all. . . **We must not demonize the demonizers.** Those who would accuse me of being unchristian, those who would not show love to their neighbors, those who would seek to take our country in directions that I might believe are contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . Jesus died for them, too; and Jesus calls us to love them, too. Indeed, if we are called to love all people, and if we truly believe that all means all, then we are also call to love those who are difficult to love. That's not saying that I need to agree with them. That's not saying that I should not speak out when I believe they are being unloving. But I must separate the acts from the person.

In a sermon given to the Detroit Council of Churches during Lent 1961, Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

We must love our enemies because love has, within its very power, transforming qualities. Hate serves to destroy. Love serves to build up. Hate seeks destructive ends. Love seeks constructive ends. Hate seeks to annihilate. Love seeks to convert. Hate seeks to live in monologue. Love seeks to live in dialogue. And it is only through love that we are able to redeem and transform the enemy neighbor.

It was Dr. King's most commonly quoted commandment of Jesus: "I say to you, you must love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you."

As Christians we are called to look beneath the hatred, beneath the demonizing, to find the spark of the divine, to find the image of God in all people. Folks that's difficult; but, as I've said before, it's not easy being Christian. And so we pray, we pray and we speak out and we act. We pray and we work to end the demonizing. We pray and we work to unite the family of God into one flock with one shepherd. And we also pray that God would help us to love our brothers and sisters, all our brothers and sisters that we might love God with all your hearts and minds and souls and strength.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
As we speak out to end the hatred,
as we speak out to end the violence,
as we seek to further your kingdom upon this earth,
may we always speak with love.
Help us love all our neighbors, in your holy name.
Amen.

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