

On Enmity

Bill Miller

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

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Text: Mark 14:32-52 Haggai 2: 10-19 (Year D lectionary)

What is Haggai talking about here? What's the back story? The Jewish remnant has returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, and they are beginning to rebuild the temple. The Samaritans, who had not been exiled, ask if they can help. Haggai poses two rhetorical questions, and to the priests, who answer: "No, you can't make something that is unholy clean just by touching it with something that is holy. But if something clean comes into contact with an unclean thing, then yes, it also becomes unclean itself." In other words, rotten apples spoil good apples, but good apples can't save those that are already rotten to the core. "So it is with this people," Haggai says – those people, the Samaritans. Don't let them help. They cannot be made clean by working with us on the temple, and they will defile both us and the temple if they do. No collaboration!

So who were the Samaritans? They lived in the northern kingdom of Israel, between Galilee and Judea, and were descended from three of the twelve Hebrew tribes. Thus they had much in common with the Jews genetically, ethnically, geographically, and religiously. Their bible was the Pentateuch, the same first five books of Hebrew scripture. They revered Abraham and Moses and looked forward to the coming of a Messiah. Most had not been removed to Babylon, but had remained in Israel all along. They believed that they practiced the pure Hebrew religion as it had existed before the exile. The disagreement, in a way, had to do with who was practicing the "real" Hebrew religion, much as modern denominations sometimes argue about who is "really" Christian and who is not. When the Samaritans were rejected from helping rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, they built their own temple on Mount Gerizim on the West Bank and became bitter enemies. This enmity was still festering centuries later at the time of Jesus. The Jews despised Samaritans as racially and religiously inferior, thus making them an ideal image for Jesus' famous parable.

It is possible to interpret the parable of the Good Samaritan simply as encouragement to be kind to others – pretty tame humanistic stuff. Maybe this particular Samaritan was just a fluke, an exception to the rule of bad seed. But why, then, did Jesus use a Samaritan at all in his story? Jesus was rejecting the idea that Samaritans are inferior. Many Samaritans, like the woman at the well (in John 4), did recognize Jesus as the Messiah and eventually became Christians. The parable is a specific example of Jesus' more fundamental teaching to "*Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.*" That is what the Samaritan did in helping a Jew. When asked what the greatest commandment is (Mark 12:28-31), Jesus said to love God, and also to love your neighbor as yourself. "Neighbor" - the same word he used for the Good Samaritan. In other words, he charges us: "Do not hate."

In the gospel lesson for today, we have another example from Jesus of lovingkindness in adversity, this time in the Gethsemane garden. Three times a deeply distraught Jesus asks his disciples to stay awake and pray with him for one hour. Three times they fall asleep. Twice he comments on what they have done, and asks again. When Judas finally arrives with an armed mob and betrays him, there is no name-calling, no hatred from Jesus. In fact in Matthew's and Luke's gospels, the one whom Jesus rebukes is his own disciple who struck out with a sword.

So what is hate? Yes, it involves the emotion of anger, but it is far deeper and more long-lasting than that. Hatred is hardening of the heart, the opposite of *agape*. It is an intense dislike, disdain, contempt, and hostility for particular people. Psychologist John Gottman's research over decades with married couples shows that the one characteristic most likely to destroy a relationship – that which a marriage cannot survive – is contempt. Once one sees another as contemptible, it is a short step to want to hurt or destroy. A vital part of military training is first to dehumanize your target, the enemy. It makes hatred and killing possible.

We find ourselves in the midst of a particularly hateful political campaign. Negative ads on both sides inspire hatred, complete with ominous background music. Instead of focusing on issues, negative advertising is about demonizing people and parties as the evil enemy. Once you accept that picture of fellow human beings as deserving contempt, then hardness of heart sets in. It breeds the arrogance of “I’m OK, and you’re not OK.” “I am better than they are.” Then it is no longer a matter of discussing what kind of people or nation we will be, but rather of *winning* against an enemy at any cost. “War,” said Father Daniel Berrigan, “is a battle for souls – *ours*.”

A central teaching of Jesus is “Do not hate.” Hatred is heart disease. Its end is the destruction of relationships, of community, and ultimately of ourselves. If we hate, we have serious spiritual healing to do in order to get to its opposite, to *love* those whom we think of as enemies. Hating someone as an enemy becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it did with the Samaritans. What if after the exile the Jews and Samaritans had instead rebuilt the temple together? It could have changed the course of history, and Jesus would have had to find another example – perhaps a parable of the Good Roman.

Do not hate. Don’t give into the reclassification of anyone as a second-class human, an idiot, a parasite, contemptible beyond redemption. Perhaps there are exceptions - truly evil individuals as Scott Peck described in *The People of the Lie* – but we are unlikely to meet them. To take the view, “I’m OK, you’re not OK” is to perpetuate division. You stop talking and stop listening, and like all forms of aggression, it invites the other to treat you in the same manner. It is where our Congress has been so terribly mired. Politics at the moment is not about building together, but about defeating an enemy.

Carl Jung believed that what we hate reveals much about us. When we react with such strong passion and contempt against another person or group, when we insist that we are *not* like them and see the other as wholly wrong, we are probably casting stones at our own shadow – the parts of ourselves that we refuse to acknowledge or accept. There is a bit of folk wisdom that when we point a finger at someone, three fingers point back at us. In the valley of the shadow we think that we have God and Truth on our side and that the other is totally mistaken, misguided, or evil. Are we perhaps acting out, in the political dynamics of left and right as opposites, some conflict within ourselves?

We have, I think, two ancient motivations hard-wired into us: self-interest, and our common welfare. There is a part of me that wants to keep all I can for myself, build bigger barns to store it, and use it any way I please – a self that says “I’ve earned mine and you’re on your own.” How easy it is for me, I confess, to project that onto a political party or candidate, and say, “That’s not in me, that’s who *they* are.” And there is another part of me that knows we are all God’s children and when someone is hungry or homeless or oppressed, we are all diminished – that I *am* my brothers’ and my sisters’ keeper and am responsible to share what I have in time, talent and treasure. In the simple language of the movie *Ice Age*: “That’s what you do in a herd.” How easy it is for me to project that ideal image onto my own party or candidates, ignoring all their faults, foibles, and fact fudging. The bitter passion of this election says to me that we are walking deep in the valley of the shadow, and are really trying to work out something fundamental in ourselves – about who we are and how we will be as a nation.

Is the solution, then, a sweet smile and an obsequious “I’m OK, and you’re OK?” That might be progress, but Christian consciousness is much deeper than that. I think it was William Sloane Coffin who first quipped, “I’m not OK, you’re not OK, and *that’s* OK.” It is a confessional consciousness; a humble recognition of the beam in our own eye, that none of us is without a dark side. As in our gospel lesson, everyone – even Peter – abandoned Jesus, and ran away in naked humanness.

Don’t give in to hate. Whenever we feel contempt, it should set off loud alarm bells, for hatred is precisely the opposite of what Jesus taught. Hate is not a Christian value. Keep talking and listening and seeking common ground. Do not hate. “*Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. And pray for those who abuse you.*” This is the difficult and challenging word of our Lord Jesus Christ.