Sunday, February 19, 1995
UNLIMITED LOVE
Luke 6:27-38

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

Those of us who profess to follow the Christian way are called to act differently from others in this world. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Most people do that. Is there anywhere in any code of ethics a statement more radical than, “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you"?

To understand how we are to behave when practicing the unlimited and unconditional love Jesus spoke of, it is helpful to briefly review the major ethical stages in the history of human relationships.

Most of us are familiar with the phrase, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” This rule, found in the Old Testament, signified a major shift in ethical behavior. It limits our desire for retaliation.

This rule insists that a person must never take more than one eye for an eye, never more than one tooth for a tooth. Stated in the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament, this law became necessary to guard against the normal way of doing business: namely, unlimited retaliation. “Kill my cat, and I’ll kill your dog, your mule, and you too.”

The origin of unlimited retaliation is, of course, the notion that might makes right. If someone harms you or a member of your family, group, or nation, and if you have the power, then it’s acceptable to avenge that harm in any way possible, without limits.

“Get even, but no more,” is certainly an improvement over unlimited retaliation. It’s what most people have in mind when they speak of criminal justice. “You did the crime; you do the time.” It’s the most frequently used justification for capital punishment.

Here we have the first two stages: unlimited retaliation and limited retaliation. A third stage can be defined as “limited love.” In the 19th chapter of Leviticus in the Old Testament, it is written, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “Neighbor” in this context is defined as one of your own kind, your own family, your own tribe. The commandments “You shall not kill,” “You shall not steal,” and “You shall not commit adultery” were originally seen in this same context. You were not to kill a member of your own family, tribe, or kind, but killing others was not prohibited.

Again, a step forward: limited love is an improvement over limited retaliation. Furthermore, limited love can be very moving and costly. I’m thinking of children’s love for their parents and parents’ love for their children. But when the neighbor to be loved is limited to one’s own family, tribe, or kind of people, then limited love has historically supported white supremacy, religious bigotry, burning heretics at the stake, and more.

Limited love can at times be more self-serving than generous. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Most people do that.”

Jesus took this whole matter of love one stage further — unlimited love. It is the love that God offers each of us and the love we occasionally offer when we make a gift of ourselves without preconditions.

Jesus practiced this kind of unlimited love. Perhaps you've noticed that he healed people with no strings attached. He did not say to the man he healed of blindness, "Don't use your eyes to lust after women." After he healed the man with the withered hand, he did not say, "Be sure now that you don't use your hands for stealing."

Furthermore, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus completely redefined "neighbor." The neighbor we are to love is the person in need, no matter how near or far from us; no matter how different from us; no matter their religion, race, gender, disease, or sexual preference. The neighbor to be loved lives in a neighborhood as wide as God's creation.

I believe we have a lot of trouble in our country and in other parts of the world today because millions of us who claim to be followers of the way of Christ don't love very well. I worry because too many souls are not growing, but are becoming more shallow, narrow, less generous, and more vindictive.

We seem to be far more aware of what divides us than what connects us. Remember those lines from the poet Edwin Markham:

"He drew a circle that shut me out —
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in."

"Love your enemies," said Jesus. Lest you misunderstand, this kind of unlimited love does not mean turning yourself into a doormat so that people can walk all over you.

But it does mean not letting yourself be shaped and determined by the hostilities and hate unleashed on you. It means acting, not reacting. It means not letting someone else, enemy or friend, determine what you are going to do or be. It means living from the inside out.

It is the pursuit of a life one learns from God, who does not reciprocate but is kind even to the ungrateful and selfish.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." This refusal of reactive opposition is one of the most profound and difficult truths in the Bible. Jesus knew that we tend to become what we hate. The psychologist Carl Jung wrote, "You always become the thing you fight the most."

The alcoholic who tries to conquer his addiction by force finds it futile. The harder the person tries to quit, the more he or she fails; and the more the person fails, the less self-esteem and confidence he or she has to try to quit again. The experience of A.A. members is that you have to acknowledge that you have failed in all attempts to stop, that you have no power over the disease, and that you must turn to a higher power and a supportive community for help. As long as we only hate something, we do not defeat it; rather, we draw it to ourselves, and the effect is that we give it more power.

Prohibition was a grand failure at resisting evil. It drew so much attention to booze and engendered so much rebellion against legal restraints that far more alcohol was being consumed by the time it was repealed than before it went into effect.

What can happen to individuals can also happen to groups of people and to nations. “By intensity of hatred,” wrote anthropologist George William Russell, “nations create in themselves the characteristics they imagine in their enemies.” Conquerors throughout history have been conquered by those they conquer. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, proved either a shrewd student of history or a prophet when he reputedly said, “Even if we lose, we shall win, for our ideals will have penetrated the hearts of our enemies.”

No wonder Jesus said that we are to “love our enemies” and not hate them, for by hating them we only become more like them. It harms us and does nothing at all to change them. “The ultimate weakness of violence,” observed Martin Luther King Jr., “is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.”

Dr. Lewis Thomas, who did extensive research on the effects of disease within the human being, came to believe that the greatest damage from most diseases is not caused by the disease itself, but by a panicked overreaction of the body’s own defenses.

Have you not had the experience of being unconsciously attracted to the very enemy or evil you have most strongly denounced? It may be that your intense hatred against an evil is a dangerous sign that it fascinates you. Literature is filled with stories of this condition.

Jesus’ invitation for us to love our enemies is the way out. It keeps us from becoming like our enemy. It keeps us from becoming the very thing we hate.

I am told that many of the various systems of martial arts and spirituality have been built on this principle of dealing with evil and temptations. Though differing in detail, the basic orientation of all of them is using the opponent’s own momentum and energy to disarm that person with as little injury as possible.

Women have long known that in the process of childbirth, to tighten against the pain only increases it. To be able to surrender to the pain, to enter its core by breathing slowly and deeply, reduces the pain of the contractions. Others have applied the same insight to life generally — instead of trying to fight off loneliness or the shadow that scares us, to instead accept it, breathe with it, turn toward it open-handedly, and give it love, acceptance, and the possibility of gracious transformation.

Not only does loving our enemies keep us from becoming like them, it gives us control of our actions rather than making us slaves to our reactions. Moreover, by loving our enemies, we might be surprised to find God in them, for God can be present in our enemies as much as God is within us.

In the story of the Good Samaritan that Jesus told, that’s what happened. The Jew who was hurt and left to die in the ditch found God in the Samaritan, and in that day and time, there were no greater enemies than the Jews and the Samaritans. And the Samaritan found God in the Jew. What a surprise for both of them.

In addition, there are times when we need to hear the message that our enemies have for us, and if we only hate them, we will not hear what they have to say, which can be for our good. Our enemies present us with opportunities for spiritual growth.

I remember being present in a community meeting, and as it was nearing its end, a man in the audience stood up and began to severely criticize all of us for what we should be doing and were not doing.

I asked who the person was, and someone sitting next to me said, “Oh, he’s always doing that. He’s a jerk who likes to stir up trouble.” I listened carefully to him, and while he was undoubtedly a jerk in the way he was saying what he was saying, he also happened to be right in what he was saying. He was the only person in the room who had come to grips with the real problem that all the rest of us were politely evading. He was telling us some things we very much needed to hear.

An old saying goes, “An idea isn’t responsible for who believes in it.” People we consider to be bad or our enemies, or with whom we disagree, can at the same time have some very good ideas.

There are times when people we consider our opponents or enemies may be messengers of God telling us a truth we need to hear.

To love our enemies in the sense that Jesus suggested does not mean that we will necessarily become close friends with them or have them over for dinner. Rather, it means going farther than the usual tribal morality that loves only those who love us. There is much more to love than sentimentality or having a close personal relationship, one on one. It can be that, but it can also be much more. For example, justice is a form of love. Treating another person with respect and dignity, whether or not you like them, is a form of love.

Remember the parable of the sheep and the goats that Jesus told? He said that one day before God would be gathered all the nations of the world and the individuals in them, people like you and me, and that God would say to some of us, “Come, O blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you came to me.” And they will ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And God will say, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.”

“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you.” In so doing, you may be loving God, who can also be present in those you consider your enemies. Amen.