

Enemy love as vocation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 19 February 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 7A

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18; Matthew. 5: 38-48; Contemporary Reading:
“*Nobody’s Business*” by Martin Luther King Jr

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

The reading from Matthew’s gospel, part of the Sermon on the Mount, consists of some terribly hard teachings. Turning the other cheek. Asking the oppressed to give cloak as well as coat. Giving to the beggars and the borrowers. Loving your enemy, for heaven’s sake. And praying for those who persecute you.

David Lose, one of the commentators I read this week described two traditional patterns of interpretation of this text. Two temptations. First is what he calls the Lutheran temptation (and Lose is a Lutheran). In this approach, when interpreters get to Jesus’s too hard teachings, they assume that Jesus didn’t really expect us to do these things, and that the purpose of the teaching is to remind us of our need for God’s forgiveness and grace. So, the whole Sermon on the Mount is a set up that climaxes in the totally impossible: “*be perfect as God is perfect.*” And therefore, our response should not be to try to achieve this, but to fall on God’s mercy.

The second temptation he calls Pelagian, after Pelagius the 4th century monk. Pelagius was the theological nemesis of Augustine, who was infuriated by Pelagius’s optimistic anthropology. While the Lutheran approach doesn’t take Jesus’s teachings seriously, the Pelagian approach takes them too seriously, asserting that we humans can overcome sin in ourselves and our world through our own efforts.

Lose suggests that we approach the text by starting at the end, with “*Be perfect as God is perfect.*” If we can understand this, as neither a totally hopeless goal because of human sin, nor an outcome that can be achieved by our will and perseverance, then maybe we can find a life-giving word here.

The call to be perfect can be both off-putting and demoralising. But the English translation misses the essence of the Greek word that is translated as ‘perfect.’

In Greek the word is *telos*. It doesn’t mean moral perfection, but rather has the sense of reaching one’s intended outcome. Its meaning is found in the phrase that we sometimes use when we speak of Christian life leading us to “*be all that we can be.*” Being perfect as God as perfect is to live, as John Shelby Spong has described it: “*Living fully, loving wastefully and being all that we can be.*”

Be the person and community God created you to be, and let God be God.

If we start from this point, we can return to the teachings of Jesus, in a way that can free us from the dichotomy of putting them in the totally too hard basket, or from an optimism that fails to recognise the enormous challenge they represent to ourselves and our community, locally and globally.

I don't find it very helpful when Christian life is portrayed as obedience to God or Jesus or to the commandments. This is not because I think we know better, but because at the heart of the gospel there is, it seems to me, more invitation and inspiration than there is commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites and Jesus promises.

Being attuned to Divine Presence means being open to living more fully, than we would if we relied only on our own resources. Traditional theology has expressed this in terms of the idea that God has a plan or a purpose for us. I don't see this as meaning that the details of our development and life journey are micromanaged by God, but that when we are open to Divine Presence, we may become part of something much greater than our individual selves, and we may participate in, and contribute to, the common good. For love and for justice.

And it is for this that we were created.

Jesus called this new world, emerging already in our midst, so close and yet so far away, the reign of God.

This world that he imagined is a place where violence doesn't breed more violence, where hate does not multiply exponentially.

Ghandi, though not a Christian, understood this when he declared "*an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.*"

Dr Martin Luther King, Jr grasped Jesus's vision when he stated, "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.*"

Loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us, breaking the cycle of revenge...These are teachings that are incredibly hard. Even so, they are teachings that are to be taken seriously. The invitation here, and the inspiration, is to live as if we really believe that Divine Presence, Sacred Energy, is among us, beckoning us to move toward the reign of God, and to live as if we believe that the Divine Presence sustains us as we journey, individually and collectively, however imperfectly, to another way of being.

These teachings are a call to practise living as citizens of the reign of God, even now.

In 1999, US theologian Walter Wink wrote "*The Powers that Be: theology for a new millennium.*" Two years before September 11, 2001, he claimed that the ultimate religious question for the 21st century should be "*How can we find God in our enemies?*"

With everything that has happened globally in the past 17 years, this was indeed a prescient reframing. The resurgence of a hard political right in Australia accompanying the demonization of refugees and Muslims; and the endless violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and too many other places plagued by the wars of American Empire, make it clear that responding to this question is more urgent now than ever.

How can we find God in our enemies?

In answering, it is first important to address the way the teachings that we should love our enemies and not resist the evil doer has been distorted and used against oppressed people and people who are victimised by violence.

These are teachings that have been used to keep battered women and abused children in unsafe situations. They have been used to tell indigenous people to cooperate in the oppression of colonisation, to tell people of colour to accept racism, to tell LGBTI people to wait patiently for liberation.

These teachings must not be seen as recommending mere passive acquiescence in the face of violence and harm. Everywhere that the gospel is heard, including here in our congregation, there are people who are suffering from harm, who have suffered in the past, or who will suffer in the future.

I want to say clearly that Jesus is not advising us to accept our wounds and embrace our assailants. On the contrary, the centrepiece of this teaching is noncooperation with harm in all its forms.

The first step in learning to love one's enemies is to name them enemies — to declare the enmity between us, and to proclaim our struggle for life, livelihood and well-being that resolutely opposes our exclusion.... To do otherwise is to collude with the enemy, not to love the enemy.

Colluding with the enemy is most emphatically not what Jesus is asking when he suggests that we turn the other cheek. This text has been misconstrued in ways that maintain existing power relations of dominance and oppression. It is not inviting us to be doormats. It is not asking us to deny the violence that is done to us and to others.

So how does this work out when Jesus taught non-violence, turning the other cheek, and giving the shirt of your back? Does loving my enemy mean giving my enemy what he or she wants? Does it mean that an asylum-seeker should accept passively the failure of the Australian government to offer protection and due process?

I do not believe that Jesus understood loving enemies as surrender. Australian biblical scholar Greg Jenks claims that the sentence: '*Do not resist an evildoer*' should be translated as '*Do not violently resist an evildoer.*' Jesus certainly resisted. He did so by refusing to participate in the domination system.

By voluntarily going a second mile, the first mile is transformed from being something the oppressed is forced to do (in Jesus' time by a Roman soldier who could force a Jew to carry his kit for a mile) into something that is chosen. What on the surface, seems like acquiescence, is at a deeper level non-adversarial defiance.

We are to love our enemies as we focus on dismantling the hierarchies of domination. To love our enemies without that commitment to justice, is to fail to be true to the vision of Jesus.

When I last preached on this text, three years ago, I spent some time talking about Walter Wink's understanding of the way in which turning the other cheek was an act of nonviolent resistance, because it made it impossible for the perpetrator of violence to use a backhand blow, which was used by powerful people to humiliate and degrade the oppressed. Turning the other cheek meant claiming, non-violently, full humanity and equality by risking being punched.

Walter Wink went on to say that Jesus did not advocate nonviolent resistance merely as an effective technique, but because it opened the possibility of the enemy being transformed, of the enemy becoming just.

Thinking about this teaching in the context of contemporary Australian society I find myself alternately enraged and despairing about the political culture under the coalition government and a weak-kneed opposition that seems to covet power more than justice.

What should enemy love look like here and now? For a start, it means naming: Peter Dutton, whom I really dislike, is an enemy of asylum seekers, but so too is Tanya Plibersek, whom I do like. Scott Morrison, with his lump of coal, is an enemy of our beautiful, fragile ecosystem. Cory Bernardi is an enemy of LGBTI people, and actually so too is Malcolm Turnbull. Human Services Minister Alan Tudge, minister responsible for the Centrelink debt collection system, is the enemy of poor and disabled Australians. Pauline Hanson and Jacqui Lambie are enemies of Muslim people who seek to live peacefully and equally in Australia.

Loving our enemies does not mean that we should not feel anger about the damage these political leaders are doing. It is not a matter of liking or disliking. Loving enemies means seeing the part they play in systems greater than themselves: political, cultural, and economic systems.

It means responding to them with a love that is from God, to insist that they turn from evil and oppression because they too are called to be all that they can be. There is, for them also, a telos which is participation in God's reign.

This gospel reading asks us to consider that, if we can be forgiven and transformed, then surely we must also believe that such transformation can be worked with anyone. To love our enemies is to see the oppressors through the prism of the reign of God, to see them not as they are now but as they can become: transformed by the power of God, the ground of being, the source of love.

In the face of the most extreme opponents ("enemies") and in the face of acts of opposition ("persecution"), Jesus advises defiance. But not defiance directed against the enemies themselves, since this simply perpetuates and intensifies the relationship's adversarial character, but rather a deeper defiance directed against the vicious, endless cycle of enemy making and domination. Do not fight fire with fire, Jesus is teaching us; rather, fight fire with water, and in this way refuse to take part in the incendiary, all-too-familiar work of injury and domination.

Living this way entails, whenever possible, discontinuing arrangements that allow or enable perpetrators to wreak havoc. Loving enemies recognises that the damage they do to others, they are also doing to themselves, and to keep concern for their well-being as children of God, in front of us as we struggle for life, love and justice for all God's children.

To take neither the Lutheran nor the Pelagian approach, means a transformation of our own relationship with Divine Presence, and from that a transformation of our relationships with our enemies, with our neighbours and with ourselves.

In our humanness, we may not be able to love as God loves, but we can start in the recognition of shared humanity.

To live this way will involve opening ourselves to mystery, to practices that enable us to realise, to know, that deep interconnection is at the heart of reality.

That as we are children of God, so too are our enemies, and we owe it to ourselves and to them, to live this truth every day of our lives, as we live out the call to dismantle the system of domination that keeps us all from being who we are called to be.