

Surprised by Humanity
Love Your Enemies Part II
Luke 7: 1-10
September 17, 2017

Pastor Abby and I are preaching through a series this fall on Loving our Enemies. Last week, Pastor Abby talked about how our faith will invite us to leave room for enemies to surprise us and today's scripture and sermon build on that theme.

Over the summer, I was reading some on faith and politics, trying to better understand the Bible's concern for the transformation of the world and the church's call to participate in that work.

One of the books I started and am still reading was written by a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Katherine J. Cramer, and the book's title is *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. This is a book about the urban/rural divide in our country right now.

The book opens with a story. The author tells the story of a friend of hers, also a resident of Madison, Wisconsin who was filling up his car at a gas station in Madison. Her friend drives a Prius and has two bumper stickers on his vehicle, a "Obama 2012" sticker and a "Recall Walker" sticker.

A cool vintage convertible pulls into the gas station next to her friend in the Prius. Her friend starts chatting up the driver when he gets out of his car. The man in the convertible looks at Tom, looks at Tom's car, and says, "I don't talk to people like you."

Besides offending our notions of Minnesconsin Nice and how we should behave at a gas station, This story may hit home for those of us who drive Priuses, or who know and love a Prius driver, or we work somewhere where there are many Priuses in the parking lot. This guy is saying that If we are in this category, we aren't worthy of conversation. If we are in this category of people and if we are honest with ourselves, when we are at a gas station and a large modified diesel pickup drives in with exhaust pipes that stick up behind the cab ready to belch thick black smoke, and window stickers that offend us in new and creative ways, we may not say out loud, but we may think to ourselves, "I don't talk to people like you."

This is where more and more of us are. Angry at and offended by our neighbors, We may be afraid of our neighbors too. It is increasingly hard to see the complicated human beings behind the exteriors we present to the world.

The gospel stories can be helpful here. They can be challenging in that way that we know is good for us. Our story from the gospel of Luke for today is the first story after the sermon on the Plain. The Gospel of Matthew has the sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of Luke has the sermon on the Plain. Same teaching just different geographical features. These "sermons" articulate the values, some scholars would says, "the platform" of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus has just taught, "do not judge, do not condemn, love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you." If the writer of Luke is a good storyteller, which this writer is, we might expect a story that shows people living this teaching out in some way, and that is exactly what happens.

This story comes to life when we know that the characters in story are people who would say to one another, “I don’t talk to people like you.” The Centurion is an enemy a few times over. First, the Centurion is not a Jew, but a Gentile. Different life, different diet, different way. He is “not one of us.” The Centurion was a symbol of power, a symbol of power taken away. He was the commander of a military unit of a hundred soldiers, and he represented the occupying authority of Rome and Herod. There were many reasons for Jews like Jesus, and the elders in this story, not to talk with Centurions.

Immediately though, the story tells us that there is a complicated human being behind this Centurion exterior. The centurion has a slave, which was common. The Roman economy depended on slaves. But the centurion values this slave. The slave is ill and close to death and the centurion wants to do something about it. He hears about Jesus and he sends some Jewish elders to give him a message. When the elders approach Jesus, they assume that Jesus won’t automatically help a Centurion. They assume that Jesus won’t want to cross this divide and help this guy.

The Jewish elders vouch for the Centurion. They aren’t appealing to Jesus for the Centurion because they are afraid of him. They are appealing to Jesus because they are grateful to him, maybe they admire him, maybe they even see him as their friend. They say, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” Maybe there are many Centurions who have earned the anger and resentment that is directed toward them, but here is one who is surprising, who is different. He

lives with compassion and his friends want to return the favor, they want to be compassionate towards him, and the servant in his care.

Jesus is convinced. He goes with the Jewish elders towards the Centurion's home, but before he arrives more surprising actions take place. The Centurion sends friends to Jesus to say, "do not trouble yourself. I am not worthy to have you in my house, therefore I did not presume to come to you." Here is a person of great power humbling himself. This Centurion may be suggesting that he is aware that Pharisees regarded a Gentile's home as unclean due to dietary differences, and didn't want Jesus, a Jew, to be placed in a circumstance that would compromise an important aspect of his life and faith. The Centurion says, "Only speak the word and my servant will be healed. For I am also a man set under authority and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another 'come' and he comes, and to my slave, 'do this' and he does it." Jesus is amazed and says, "even in Israel I have not seen such faith." Jesus, from a distance, heals the slave and goes on his way.

Jesus is amazed at this Centurion's faith, and I wonder, if "faith" here is not only the Centurion's trust that Jesus is powerful enough to heal across divides, but if the faith that amazes Jesus is also the way the Centurion is living out his life. The Centurion, of all people, is the one who is living out the teachings of the Sermon on the Plain. The Centurion is loving his enemies and doing good to those who hate him, showing compassion. The Centurion is living a healing life, building relationships across divides and showing, even before his little speech to Jesus, the trust he places in love. Jesus is amazed and inspired by the many actions of the Centurion's life. Jesus action doesn't just heal the servant, he continues to heal a destructive divide among people.

There is a surprising human being behind the Centurion exterior. He is living a life of healing and love where it was not expected and even Jesus is inspired and changed as he goes along his way.

In the book, *Altruism: The Power of Compassion to Change Yourself and the World* by Matthieu Ricard, a Buddhist monk, Ricard points out that the Dalai Lama distinguishes between two types of altruistic love, what he calls biological altruism and extended altruism. Biological altruism is easy the Dalai Lama says. This is the love that parents extend to children or we extend to family and friends. When we know one another and are getting along with one another, it is relatively easy to sacrifice for that person.

Ricard says, "Biological altruism, [though,] is not easily extended to strangers and even less so to our enemies." "Extended altruism (the altruism that goes beyond our circle to strangers and enemies)...in most people, is not spontaneous and must be cultivated. Whatever our point of departure, we all have the possibility of cultivating altruism and transcending the limits that restrict it to the circle of those close to us." Jesus is encouraging the same move in his teaching on loving enemies in Matthew 5:46, "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?"

What if we simply see ourselves as a community that is intentionally practicing, intentionally cultivating love towards our enemies. Who else is doing this right now? Will anyone else do this right now, if not the church? We will not always succeed, and maybe success needs to be redefined because this is a stretch for us as human beings. Maybe success is the practice itself: staying tethered to a tradition, to stories, to a love that will send us across painful divides, towards those who don't like us, love that will insist that we be respectful

at the very least, compassionate at best, towards those who hate us. Our faith will hold out hope, it will even expect that we will be surprised by the complex human beings that we find on the other side of the fences that we construct. Cultivating this altruism that can extend outward is part of our faith practice.

Our world needs communities of people who are practicing this way. We need to be in a community of people who can help us sustain this view and this life. It isn't easy, I hear many of you saying, "I'm so angry at what I see people doing and saying." That's why we need one another. We need to be reminded that we will be surprised by the complex human beings we find, because through those moments love can change us. May God grant us grace as we walk this journey together. Amen.