

-On June 17th, 2015 Dylan Roof joined a bible study and prayer service at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Following the bible study, Roof pulled a gun out and shot dead 9 church attendees including the senior pastor Clementa C. Pinckney. Despite Roof pleading guilty to nine counts of murder and being sentenced to an eventual death penalty, perhaps the most dramatic moment of the entire trial was when family members of the 9 victims addressed him personally and each said three words to him: "I forgive you." One of them added: "There is no room for hatred in our community of Jesus."

-I cannot, nor do I want to even pretend to, know what it must be like to suffer violence in such a horrific way. I cannot even begin to understand the courage it took to say such words to this young man. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Whether you are inspired or cannot fathom the statements of these family members, you cannot miss the fact that these words of Jesus were front and center in a real way.

-What does it mean to love our enemies?

-These statements in Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" in the gospel of Luke address an important way of living that is one of the hardest to make sense of in the entire bible.

-It follows right after what is referred to as Luke's version of the "blessings/woes" which we read last week. These blessings and woes took on the very core of the Greek honor/shame system which was widely known and practiced by society in Jesus' time. Jesus' blessings and woes are almost a rallying call, especially for the poor and destitute around him: "blessed are the poor/woe are the rich". Let's go get them! Start the revolution!

-Then there are our verses today which begin with an incredibly important word: *alla* (in Greek) "But". But, love your enemies.

-Last year, a friend of mine who is another Lutheran pastor in Montana told a story of confronting a congregation member who continually talked down to women in the church. After inappropriate comments were made towards another female congregation member at the annual meeting, my friend decided to confront this man (who was a longtime church member himself) in a conversation that didn't go very well. At the end, this man stormed out of my friend's office and shouted: "stop judging me! These are my views and Jesus said you shouldn't judge me for believing man is different from woman". At this point, my friend who is a female pastor, told me she had to stop every bone in her body from literally punching him.

-The greek word that is translated here as "to judge" (*krino*) literally means "to pick out/or separate out". One thing that Jesus, I believe, is trying to do here is separate out two very difficult themes that permeate the entire bible: judgement and justice.

Judgement is "picking out" what is either (in someone's opinion) is right or wrong.

Justice is calling people to account when they diminish each other's personhood. The

problem that Jesus is trying to address here, I think, is that judgement is being confused with justice.

-There is a famous line out there that states: "love the sinner, hate the sin." That sounds fine and well, but it still goes against Jesus' point: you are STILL making a judgement on the person and "separating out" this person as "less than" when you are saying "sinner." How are you sure they are a "sinner" in this case? Are you the best judge to determine when people sin or not? How about instead of "loving the sinner, hate the sin", we say: "love all people, hate injustice." Could it be better to simply look at all people as full human beings and start from that point?

-Turns out the church loves to "love sinners" (and make judgements), but finds it harder to love all people.

-Is Jesus separating out one's person from one's actions here?

-One pastor and professor of mine in seminary constantly asked a question she feels is paramount to Jesus' ministry. The question is: do my judgements diminish the god-given personhood of someone else? If I make a judgement on a woman for leading a church as an ordained pastor or a man who commits himself in marriage to another man or a person of color who is at the top of their university class ranking, is that hurting my personhood or their personhood? If the answer is yes in either case, then that is not a judgement issue, but a justice issue and something the body of Christ is called to speak out against. Love everybody as a child of God, hate injustice. Perhaps the hardest thing about this is confusing judgement with justice.

-But here is the other important point. Verses 31-32 state: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same." I found another pastor who translated these two verses as: "it's easy to love the people you like, it's harder to love jerks." Whether this be the absolute extreme with forgiving Dylan Roof in 2015 or simply loving your Dad, loving the jerks in this world is one of the hardest things we human beings possibly are called to do.

-No story in the bible probably proves this point better than the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, our Old Testament reading for today. But here is the thing that we might miss: we think we may be able to do this on our own. We think we can be virtuous and heroic just like Joseph in forgiving these people who tried to kill him. This, my friends, is a complete lie.

-Joseph relied on Pharaoh to allow his family to settle in Egypt, Jesus' disciples relied on each other, the apostle Paul relied on his companions to see the humanness of those jerks who hated them. Whatever it means to see the jerks in this world as fully human and a fellow child of God, we cannot do this alone without fellow brothers and sisters in Christ helping us.

--When we lose sight of the humanness of our enemy, then that means we participate in the same sin (and even evil) as they do.

-One of my college friends, Luke, told a story about a gentleman in their neighborhood growing up. Frank, a man in his 80's, didn't show his face much to people. His wife died decades ago and he lived alone. Luke explained that Frank became the talk of the neighborhood, especially among the children. You would place one foot on his yard and he would come out and scream at you to get off. As Luke got older, he recalled Frank becoming a target of humor more so than fear with the youth purposely trying to raze him: throw rocks at the house, TP the yard, get him so mad he would chase you off the property. One day, when Luke was in early high school, he recalled walking by the house after school and seeing Frank trying to fix his fence. He was trying to fasten a board to the fence structure, but would lose his balance. Luke approached him and offered to help, which Frank grudgingly accepted. After it was done, Frank said: "You know, If you would want to come and help in my yard, I would pay ya," This started the beginning of something that greatly impacted Luke's life. He began to work in yard, cleaning up things that hadn't been touched in years. Luke managed to keep his friends away from the Frank's house. Frank started to become more comfortable sitting on the porch, and Luke would come over and sit with him to talk. He found out that Frank's wife had actually been killed in a car accident with their 16 year old son. His mourning spilled into anger which affected his treatment of the neighborhood children. "I found controlling my rage when I saw my son in you neighborhood kids to be quite difficult," he said. When Luke got to college, I was with him when he received a call. Frank had died, and it was his nephew. It would be a small funeral back in Hastings, MN and the nephew explained that Frank had left specific instructions: "If you do decide to have a funeral, I want Luke to say a few words." Sometimes it takes "sitting on the porch" with our enemies to realize they have the same hopes, fears, and faults that we do. Sometimes it requires, with our community of support, to look them in the eye and be honest. We cannot do this alone.

-But, may the grace and love of God which surpasses all understanding, fill us with a new perspective. May it lead us to "sit on the porch" and "love the jerks as well as those closest to us." May we be called to the "level ground" and never forget that we are all full children of God no matter who we are or where we come from. Amen.