

Problem: What does it mean to love our enemies?

- There is a powerful movie done in 2005 titled *Joyeux Noel* that documents the incredible story rarely heard in history books of German, French, and Scottish troops forming a ceasefire during Christmas Eve 1914. The film captures the carnage and bloodshed of war turning into the quest for relationship and respect. One of the lines that a Scottish commander in the film says after being accused of treason by superiors who found this Christmas Eve truce confounding was: "without an enemy, there can be no war."

-This Sunday lifts up the theme of peace, put forward by the "International Day of Peace" celebrated around the world this last Wednesday, September 21st. The day was first created by the United Nations in 1981 with the resolution to: "recall that the promotion of peace, both at the international and national level, is among the main purposes of the United Nations and its charter...." Thousands of events took place around the world this last Wednesday which honor the advancements of peace and looking to the challenges that still need to be overcome.

-Our world today, as in the time of Jesus, desperately needs peace. As the film *Joyeux Noel* points out, war can scar and ruin entire generations. Yet, in my experience, days like the International Day of Peace and in some cases, the meaning of peace itself, can be passed off as "naive", "generalist", or even "hippy-dippy." "Peace can be a nice ideal to reach for, but it is an ideal which is too general and will never be fully realized", some critics say.

-Yet, in our gospel reading for today, Jesus in the "Sermon on the Mount" (or the "Sermon on the Plain" as it is known here in the Gospel of Luke) gives some pretty direct instructions for peace: "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." (verses 27-28) He continues on with something more specific: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (verses 29-31). So what is Jesus getting at here? Is this a peace that is too general and "out there" for our world today? Is the peace that Jesus is suggesting a nice scene, like the soldiers sitting around the campfire in WW I sharing Christmas greetings, but which will never come to pass fully for our world? What exactly does Jesus mean by "love our enemy"?

Solution: Jesus' life and resurrection point to overcoming the impossible. Jesus is, through this action, calling his followers to do the same with God's help.

-It's easy to see how a lot of us, while thinking about how to love our enemy, can get confused when reading the "turn the other cheek" passage. If you are like me, maybe some of you have thought of this passage suggesting something of a self-sacrifice to

our enemies. Maybe it's saying we can be a model in our sacrificing love or something like that. Jesus is calling us to "turn the other cheek", sacrifice some of ourselves for the greater good.

-In reality, this is not what Jesus is going for at all with this passage. Demonstration of "turn the other cheek". Slapping someone in the time of Jesus was not only an act of aggression, it was also an act to assert dominance of one class over the other. So, if _____ was my slave and I went to slap them, I would want to remind them that they are a lower class to me. To do this, in Jesus' time, you would always hit someone of a lower class with the back of your hand. Now, let's say I hit _____ and they turn their cheek. Now, I am forced with a little bit of a quandary. I can't hit them with the back of my left hand because of Jewish purity law (the left hand is the unclean hand that you go to the bathroom with and clean dirty animals with). Really, the only choice that I am left with because of gesture of "turning the other cheek" is to hit them again with the front of my hand. This is also very problematic as hitting them with the front of my open hand denotes a challenge or punch which in the time of Jesus means a sign of equal status. Thus, turning the other cheek becomes an act to force the aggressor to see the other person as an equal.

-Maybe this is getting at a more specific, less "hippy-dippy" idea of peace. Peace is not just the absence of conflict, but the bringing of the other up to the same level as yourself. Loving your enemies is not "playing nice", but radically seeing them as a fellow child of God just like yourself.

-When I was a hospital chaplain in seminary, I had the opportunity to lead worship multiple times in the Anorexia Treatment Center. One of the worship services had this exact text (Sermon on the Plains in Luke) which after my short little message, the group would have some time to discuss. One of the young women blew me away when she asked this question: "I have many enemies who I have encountered over my life: friends, family members, and co-workers. It's true that these enemies have done some awful things to me, yet there is one enemy that scares me more than anything and who I have the hardest time loving. That enemy is many times myself. How do I love that enemy?"

-Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche says it clearly: "But the worst enemy you can meet will always be yourself."

-So what does it look like then to turn the other cheek on yourself? Maybe instead of this International Day of Peace being for you an excuse to spin your wheels in thinking about big national and international, it should be about elevating all parts of yourself to equal status in peace.

-That voice inside your head that sometimes leads you to make wrong decisions, that part of your body that you hate and feel people notice and judge, the way that you might get distracted by something and miss things that are important, that part of yourself that

feels lost still in addiction or grief. What would it mean to “elevate” all of those things and come to peace with the fact that God loves you, even your inner enemies?

-Notice I am not saying “give into these enemies”. I don’t think Jesus is saying that either. Certainly if our enemy is addiction, or depression, or anger, it’s important not to let these enemies have the last word. But by elevating these things in our lives, we are simply giving them space and the right to exist. By just doing that, I believe we have more of an opportunity of choosing a substantive peace that incorporates our whole selves, not just a piece.

Implication:

-It’s the first presidential debate tomorrow and it promises to be a whopper. Insults, stretching of fact, getting an edge over an opponent. It will be anything BUT peaceful and a peak into how our country and world have become in many ways so fragmented. I wonder what will happen when all of the debate is done and the lights are turned off, what will be left to bring this division together?

-There is a great billboard sign that I pass on my way up to Flathead Lake in between St. Ignatius and Ronan that simply reads: “Peace: Make it Happen.”

-It’s true, peace does need to happen, especially during and after this election is over. Turning the other cheek to those who disagree with us is going to be needed more than ever.

- But we can’t just go out and “make it happen” in the world until we can “make it happen” in own hearts. That has to come first.

-On this International Day of Peace Sunday, I say to you, “May the peace of Christ within you now and forever.” Let us make it happen. Amen.