

May 1, 2011

LOVE OF THE FIRST STEP

Tim, Bruce and I are beginning a sermon series today on “The Hard Sayings of Jesus”. A couple months ago the three of us met and wondered together about the idea of this series and then we began to list all of the hard sayings of Jesus we could come up with. The list was rather long. Jesus was a hard teacher. He had a lot of challenging things to say about life and discipleship. So it was not easy to whittle down a list of dozens to a list of six. But we did and for the next six weeks we are going to look at them independently here in the sanctuary and over in the Garden. You can double-dip if you’d like – and hear what both of us have to say about these hard sayings of Jesus. Heresy here, truth over there. Or vice versa.

The first thought that comes into my mind when I think of the Hard Sayings of Jesus is the story you have no doubt heard of the guy who was out for a walk on a cloudy, misty, foggy morning and unbeknownst to him was walking straight toward a cliff. Not seeing where he was going he walked right off the cliff and began to plummet. As he hurtled downward he managed to grab hold of a branch sticking out of the cliff’s side – and there he hung. Not knowing how

to get out of this mess the man called up to the cliff's edge, "Anybody up there?" After a few moments of silence the sky began to rumble, lightning began to peel – and then a voice from heaven came bellowing, "Let go of the branch and I will bear thee up." The man hung there for a second and then looked up and said, "Anybody else up there?"

We do place ourselves in an interesting spot when we say to ourselves that the Bible is God's word and that God's word contains the secret to abundant living – and that scripture in its entirety is something we must reckon with – when we get confronted with a text like the one we are confronted with today, the first hard saying of Jesus - "Love your enemies." When we hear that command of Jesus' – and we begin to try to apply it to our lives – we might want to look up and say, "Anybody else up there"?

Because the truth is we all have enemies.

I love that story of the medieval knight who returned to his castle after a long journey. He was battered and bloody, his armor was dented, his horse limping and he was barely able to stay in the saddle. The Lord of the castle met him and inquired with a sense of urgency, "What hath befallen thee, Sir Knight?" Straightening up as best as he could, the knight replied, "Sire, I

have been laboring in thy service doing battle with thy enemies to the east.” At once the Lord looks worried and perplexed. He said, “But, Sir Knight, I have no enemies to the east.” “Oh my,” answered the knight, “I think that thou dost now.”

Through one means or another, we all have enemies. At least in the Biblical sense. Biblically, you don't have to be engaged in mortal combat with somebody for them to be your enemy. You don't have to be waging war under the Geneva Convention before a person descends into the qualification of enemy. An enemy is a person from whom you wish to intentionally separate yourself. An enemy is a person, or a group of people, against whom you build a wall. It may be, in your mind, a wall of protection ... or a wall of invisibility ... or a wall of distance – but nevertheless, enemies are people we want to be separated from.

Now we can fool ourselves sometimes on this one. We can fool ourselves into thinking that just because I passively separate myself from someone doesn't make them my enemy. We say, “It's not that he's my enemy, I just don't want to be around him.” “It's not that they are my enemy, it's just that I don't want to live near them.” “It's not that she's my enemy, it's just that I don't trust her.” But the truth is ... to consciously or unconsciously separate myself from someone is to experience them to some degree as enemy. Enemy, from enmity. To whatever degree I have enmity is the degree to which I have enemy. And so if we were honest with

ourselves and embraced this condition of separation that we create between ourselves and our fellow human beings – the truth is ... we likely have enemies to the east, to the west, to the north and to the south.

In the latter half of their brilliant careers, Gilbert and Sullivan, the famed composer and lyricist had a falling out over the cost of the carpet in their theater. The result was they stopped speaking to one another. They couldn't be in each other's presence. But they continued producing operas. They composed music and wrote lyrics by virtue of messenger service. You can be a partner ... and still be an enemy. To be human is to be at enmity. Before Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, at the end of the great creation story – the word enmity already has to be spoken. To be human is to be at odds.

And so Jesus, the one who seeks to bring about the new creation, says to us, "Love your enemies."

Anybody else up there?

Because of course the easier approach in all this is disengagement. Lord, I will do my enemy a favor – I will not kill him. Lord, I will do my enemy a favor, I will not sue him. Lord, I will do my enemy a favor; I will not wish him harm. And to say these things allows us to feel good about disengagement. I will not mistreat my enemy; instead I will build a mote between me and thee.

And Jesus says – Whoopee! If you love those who love you ... anybody can do that! Tax-collectors, robbers, criminals – just about anybody can love someone who loves them back. If you think that’s what we are called to, Jesus says, then we’re no different than the rest. “Love your enemy,” he says. And the Greek word for love is ... agape. Four words that could have been used in the Greek for love – philos – brotherly love, storge – friendly love, eros – a sexual love and then agape – which is a Godly love. A love that you can’t produce on your own. Love that engages even when you don’t have the will or the strength or the desire to engage. Love that says, “Lord, I can’t do this on my own. I need a power from beyond me. I need to engage myself with this person. I need to do this even though I don’t feel like I want to do this.”

Because you see we make this mistake about love ... agape love ... God-like love ... it is not a love you feel. It is not a love that you get warm tingles over. The love that Jesus calls us to love our enemy with ... is a love of action ... engagement. It’s the love of the first step.

You see, to love your enemy is not to love them in one fell swoop. Few can do this. To love our enemy is to take the first step. To love our enemy is to make the first step of engagement. It's not to forgive all at first. It's not to cast all aside. It's to ask God for the grace to take the first step. And trust him for whatever the next step might be. To love your enemy is to throw him a line. Not to jump in. Not to swim for rescue. But to throw the line ... and to find a connection ... and then see what God's spirit can do.

Anne Lamott in her great book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* talks about the pain and wounds she experienced in being raised by her mother. She had a childhood that no child deserves. She writes as an adult, "I prayed for my heart to soften but my heart remained hardened toward her ... I refused to be nice to her, and didn't forgive her for being a terrified, furious, clinging, sucking maw of need and arrogance." But then by God's grace the outer edges of her heart started to soften and she began to engage. "I discovered," she writes, "that I had forgiven her for a number of things, although for none of the big-ticket items – like having existed at all, for instance, and then having lived so long." And then she adds, "Still, the mosaic chips of forgiveness I felt that day were a start."

The mosaic chips of forgiveness.

Too many people remain enemies ... because they are paralyzed by the chasm that lies between. They don't take the first step because they see that the journey is a thousand miles. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies ... he calls us to take the first step and trust his spirit for the next step and the next step. Start with the mosaic chips ... before you get to the beautiful picture.

Miroslav Volf tells the story about a Franciscan monk from Bosnia, Ivo Markovic, whose family was caught up in the tragic events of the Balkan wars between the Croats, the Bosnians and the Serbs. In his home village, Susanj, Muslim Bosnians swept through the town killing just about everyone in their sight – including nine of Father Markovic's family. Later as the war quieted Father Markovic returned to his village and to his childhood home where some of his family was slaughtered. It was now occupied by a fierce Muslim woman who was armed and dangerous. The Father was warned not to go. But he did. As he approached the house there on the stoop was the old woman with a cigarette in her mouth and brandishing a rifle. "Go away, or I'll shoot you." She cocked the rifle. The priest, with a gentle, but firm voice responded, "No, you won't shoot me, instead you will make for me a cup of coffee." And with that he took one step. She stared at him for a while, then slowly put down the rifle and went to the kitchen. She took the last bit of coffee she had and mixed it with a few grounds to make just enough for the two to have coffee. The two mortal enemies sat down at table and sipping their coffee they began to talk. The old woman spoke of her loneliness, of the home she lost, of the

son who never returned from the wars. When Father Markovic returned a month later she told him: “I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned.” The mosaic chips began to take shape.

Love your enemies, Jesus says. And though we’d rather a different voice from above – what we do know is that what God commands us is what God knows is best for us. He would never tell us to do something if it wasn’t in his plan of grace. Love your enemies. And though that might feel like it’s letting go of a branch on the side of a cliff – the letting go starts with the first step. And we can take that first step ... because up above it’s not just a voice. It’s also a hand. The hand that will bear thee up. The hand that will not let go. The hand that will hold you as you seek to hold another.

Love of the first step.