

Luke 6:27-38

Do you remember the Beatles' song, *You Really Got a Hold on Me*. The lyrics go, "I don't like you, but I love you; seems like I'm always thinking of you..." That's sort of what Jesus is saying in today's gospel message. You don't have to like someone to love them. Only Jesus is not referring to the eros, or physical type of love, as were the Beatles, but he's referring to the agape love that comes from God.

It's difficult to find examples of enemies who loved one another, but there are a few... again a musical reference. This time it was the Royal Guardsmen who sang about Snoopy and the Red Baron. I didn't realize this wasn't about the comic strip character Snoopy until just recently. The song is loosely based on a true experience that happened in World War 2 to a real Charlie Brown whom the song writer referred to as Snoopy. The Red Baron referred to was in real life Luftwaffe pilot Franz Stigler. While piloting a German fighter, he refused to shoot down a crippled American bomber flying over Germany and trying to get back to England. The 21-year-old American pilot, Charlie Brown, was on his first mission. His crew were wounded or dead. His plane was riddled with bullet holes. Stigler saw that they were in trouble and felt that bringing the plane down would be murder. Instead, he escorted them to safety and peeled off, after saluting Brown. Decades later, the two pilots met in a well-publicized friendly encounter.

Look at today's Old Testament lesson... Joseph could have hated his brothers. He could have taken revenge on them for selling him, for the years, an estimate of 10 years, he spent in prison, all which in the big picture was their fault. But he didn't, he chose to love them instead.

But on the whole most people have a tendency to hate their enemies. That's why it's so hard to be a Christian. Jesus tells us we are to love our enemies. How do you love someone who has caused you grief? How do you love someone who stands for the exact opposite of what you support? How do you love someone who has squandered their resources and now depends on public support that your taxes are paying for? How do you love someone who leaves their garbage strewn all over instead of putting it out at the curb? How do you love the person who leaves their dog barking for hours? How do you love someone who decides to invade another country because they have the power to do so?

Looking at these things, it's a wonder we even can even get along with our neighbors. How do we manage to survive in this world? You most likely have a list of people who you consider your enemies, or at least people who you get riled up about when you think of them. But seriously, are you going to do real harm to them? We might think these people are not loveable, but, yes they are.

They might not be likeable. They might not be someone we want to spend hours with. They might never be our best friend. But they are lovable because God loves them. Jesus loves them too. And even though we aren't God, even though we aren't Jesus, we are called to love them. So how do we do that? Our Psalm from this morning tells us: "Do not be provoked by evildoers; do not be jealous of those who do wrong. For they shall soon wither like the grass, and like the green grass fade away. Put your trust in the Lord and do good;..... Commit your way to the Lord; put your trust in the Lord, and see what God will do. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently. Do not be provoked by the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes. Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; do not be provoked; it leads only to evil. But the deliverance of the righteous comes from you, O Lord; you are their stronghold in time of trouble" (Psalm 37).

That doesn't seem to make it any easier, does it? But Jesus tells us, "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (That doesn't mean to stay with those who abuse you, it means to pray for them.) It sounds good when Jesus says we should love our enemies, we might even think it's a good thing in the abstract. But it's really hard to put into practice.

One of the reasons is that we, even though I've listed a lot of scenarios earlier, we really don't have a lot of enemies, not at least enemies we see face to face. We build walls around us to keep our personal life protected, so that the ones we deem "evil" aren't allowed to enter into our space. We don't really look for people to be enemies so we can love them. Or we might believe that loving our enemies encourages them. We've been trained to expect that when we give, we will receive. Let's be realistic, we live in a world that has expectations. Well, yes, but Jesus isn't talking about idealism and realism. He is talking about love.

We can argue that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, sinless, and yes, what he's saying is great to strive for, but is it really possible? And look where he ended up... crucified. And this is how the argument goes. But don't we need something to strive for, something pushing us to be better people?

And yes, we can love those people who we don't like and who don't like us. One step at a time. That is all Jesus asks of us, to take one step at a time. And as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "it is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. Yes, it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies."

We get no glory when we love our friends. Jesus said, "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. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

So, there is a benefit to loving our enemies. We have a good feeling about doing what is Christian, it may bring us a peace that we wouldn't have otherwise found, and, every good action we perform has positive outcomes. Jesus doesn't tell us to like our enemies, we don't have to like them. Jesus tells us to love our enemies with agape love. We love them by doing good for them. Do we have to think kind thoughts about them? No. But we shouldn't dream of ways to harm them, either. Looking through the eyes of Jesus we are to love our enemies, do good to them, bless them, and pray for them. As difficult as this may seem, the first step is to pray for our enemies. Not that they'll change their evil ways but pray that God will bless them. Why on earth would you want to do that? Why would you want God to bless them? And maybe God will even bless them through your hands? Because that is what Jesus wants us to do. To show that we truly believe in God's grace. To bring about the kingdom of God.

God's grace is overflowing, it is pressed down, shaken together running over. God gives in ways that we don't understand. And Jesus calls us to live with the same grace. All glory be to God.