

Rev. Mr. Chris Smith

7.12.2015 Trinity 6

One day, a man was walking across a bridge and saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump off. He immediately ran to him and said, "Stop! Don't do it!" "Well, why shouldn't I?" he replied. The other said, "Well, there's so much to live for!" "Like what?" "Well ... do you believe in God or are you an atheist?" "I believe in God." "Me too! And are you Christian or Jewish?" "Christian." "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant." "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" "Baptist." "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" "Baptist Church of God." "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" "Reformed Baptist Church of God." "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?" "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!" To which the other man said, "Die, you heretic!" and pushed him off the bridge.

(Matthew 5:43-48) "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so. Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

At our last Morning Prayer service, I shared a message with you that painted a radical and difficult picture of what it means to be an authentic disciple of our Lord. As we listened to His words, we learned that if our faith is easy and natural, it isn't the faith of Jesus Christ. This morning, once again Jesus tells us that His disciples are radically and distinctively different than the rest of the world.

In our lesson today, Jesus tells us that if we want to show the world that we are His disciples – we are the children of God – we should do so by

loving those that are outside our circle of family and friends; and yes, He even tells us to love our enemies! “Bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” It’s clear that to Him, being a Christian isn’t about being polite or kind to all people, it’s about loving God enough to obediently follow His every command – even the command to love our enemies. Now that won’t be easy or natural; but these are the words of Jesus – this is our faith!

I believe His words tell us that loving God enough to obediently follow this command – to love our enemies – is one way that we are radically and distinctively different than the rest of the world. Listen to what He said, “For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?” In these verses Jesus tells His disciples that the love they are displaying is no greater than the love that a publican displays. A publican in Jesus’ day was a lying, cheating, immoral, tax-collecting traitor that steals from his own people. Jesus says, when you love your friend, when you greet your brother, your love rises no higher than that of a publican. You’re living by the same standard as even the most immoral and corrupt people.

So, “what reward have ye?” for that kind of love... I imagine the reward would be the same that a publican would receive – which may be nothing. The Bible tells us (1 Corinthians 3:8) “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor”. If our desire is to bring the world to Christ, to glorify God, to receive an eternal reward; we will have to do more than imitate the publicans. Remember the words of Jesus, He said, (Matthew 5:20) “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” We shouldn’t expect to be separate and special in the eyes of God if we are acting like the rest of the world.

Now, in the middle of this discussion it’s important to point out, this command to love our enemies is not to be understood as a license to allow other people to walk all over us. We are not called to be weak, we are called to be meek – like our Savior. Jesus said (Matthew 11:28-29), “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." Jesus was meek, yet when He sent His disciples out among the Gentiles He had them carry swords, He drove the moneychangers from the temple, and Matthew 23 is an entire chapter devoted to His harsh words for the scribes and Pharisees. In that chapter He calls them hypocrites, fools, blind guides, serpents, a generation of vipers, and finally asks them: "How can you escape the condemnation of hell?"

Jesus did not stop being meek in these examples, nor will He cease to be meek when He (as St. Paul tells us) "is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). Meekness is not weakness. To the contrary, meekness is great strength under control.

It is no easy thing to love our enemies – to follow the command of our Lord and to "bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you"; but by the grace of God we strive to do this so that we will not be overcome by evil, but will overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21)

The world needs to see in us this distinctively different love – a love without limits! We live in such an imperfect world, but God calls us to love perfectly; for perfect love draws the world to Him. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is our greatest example how to perfectly love our enemies. As He hung on the Cross He could have prayed to God the Father and been sent more than twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53) that would have wiped out that entire generation. Instead, He chose to obediently follow God's every command, He chose meekness, and He chose to love and pray for His enemies with these words: (Luke 23:34) "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Stephen, the first Christian martyr, followed that example as the crowd hurled stones at him and he spoke his last words, (Acts 7:60) "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

This is the love that has the power to transform the world, because when the "rest of the world" sees this love displayed they are seeing real evidence of God. Imagine taking part in the crucifixion of Jesus and hearing Him pray for you as you crucify Him. What would you think?

Imagine holding a stone in your hand, hoping to be the one that delivers the deadly blow to Stephen, and hearing him use his last words to pray for you. It would force even the hardest heart to stop and think.

Now, bring it closer to today and consider everything that a man tried to set in motion a few weeks ago by killing nine innocent people during a church Bible study. He said that his intention was to start a race war. At the least a person would expect rioting and violence similar to what happened after the deaths of men in Ferguson and Baltimore, but none of that happened. Why?

I believe the violence and death spread no further, because the world witnessed a miracle. The world witnessed the unimaginable love of God as so many of the victims' family members spoke words of forgiveness and actually prayed for the soul of the attacker. They prayed for their enemy and evil was overcome by good. You know it wasn't easy, you know it wasn't natural, and I'm not certain I could be so obedient if that happened here; so thanks be to God for His faithfulness. Thanks be to God for authentic disciples. Thanks be to God for His sons and daughters who chose to obediently follow His every command – even the command to show His love to their enemy.

The love of God has the power to transform the world. It was true 2,000 years ago, it was true a few weeks ago, and it's true today. We just have to be willing to be authentic disciples. There are too many people in the world and even in the church that are quick to push another man off the bridge – let's (you and I) by the grace of God resolve to be "the children of our Father which is in heaven", and follow His command to "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you".