

Called to Wholeness, Part 2

February 19, 2017

Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus hammers away in the Sermon on the Mount. “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*” Hmmm. Maybe all that talk last week about murder, adultery, divorce, and lying wasn’t so bad after all.

Love your enemies? We are surprised that we would even *have* enemies. We think we are too sweet and nice for anyone to have a problem with us. Or if we do have enemies, it’s because we have done something wrong. Having an enemy must mean that I’m on the *wrong* side.

In fact, we have enemies because we are on the *right* side. Martin Luther makes this clear, for example, in his comments on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. He urges parents and sponsors to be clear about what happens in Baptism.

“Therefore you need to consider,” Luther writes, “that it is no joke at all to take action against the devil and not only drive him away from the little child but also hang around its neck such a mighty, lifelong enemy.” That’s what we do to our little babies. We have enemies because we follow Jesus.

We oppose sin, death and the devil. We oppose the forces that align themselves with such principalities and powers. Being nice is not enough. Being nice won’t make us perfect. Being nice won’t make us whole.

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It’s easy to see this in terms of the dark side versus the light side of the force. In fact, the line between good and evil runs right down the center of each of us. We must first see ourselves as a battlefield where God and Satan contest our destiny. Before we try to take on sin, death and the Devil “out there somewhere,” we must confront the sin, death and evil “in here.”

That’s such a big deal that we Christians spend a whole season on it every year. We call that season “Lent.” We will enter that journey in just a few weeks.

When we do focus on the evil “out there,” we operate in very particular ways. The Sermon on the Mount is not a call for Christians to be wimps or doormats. These verses do not celebrate victimhood. Quite the opposite.

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If we use the weapons of the enemy in the battle, we will join the enemy. This is the great theological insight of films like *Star Wars* and the *Harry Potter* books. Surrendering to anger and hatred release tremendous power. That power may even destroy the enemies we face. But that power will ultimately eat us alive. We defeat the enemy only to become the Enemy.

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Our call is to be whole like God is whole. Our super power is love. In the *Song of Songs*, chapter eight, verse six, we read these words: “*for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.*” This is not the sloppy, sentimental love of the greeting card industry. This is the fierce love that will never surrender.

Did you celebrate Valentine’s Day this past week? I’m as much of a sucker for roses and chocolates as the next guy. But that’s not what St. Valentine was about. It may be that he married Christian couples in defiance of Roman imperial laws. But he was beaten, beheaded and buried because he would not stop witnessing, serving and baptizing in Jesus’ name. Valentine is the saint of God’s fierce love, not a vendor of flowers and candy.

Jesus is the fierce love of God poured out for the whole world. Jesus hangs on a cross and absorbs all the sin, death and evil the Enemy can muster. God transforms that darkness into light, that death into life, that hatred into love. In the face of such fierce love, the tools and tactics of the Enemy are useless. We Christians burn with the fire of the fierce love of God.

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The Enemy *is* defeated. But in desperation the Enemy fights on. We are warriors in that fight. What are the weapons the Holy Spirit gives us for the fight? The first is simple exposure. My first purpose in this message is to remind you that the Enemy is still at work.

Our second weapon is community. Christians should never have to face the Enemy alone. We pray and with one another. We sit and stand with one another in hospitals and jails, in court rooms and classrooms, at work and at home. We stand together against tyrants and bullies, in the face of storms and stress, in the midst of despair and death.

Our third weapon is humor. Jesus used humor in his parables. Luther relied on toilet jokes in his battles against devilish despair. In God’s kingdom, sin, death and evil and ultimately ridiculous. There is no scientific evidence that life is serious. That’s why it’s important to have parties together. You now have the theological rationale for our Mardi gras celebration!

Our fourth weapon is creative opposition. That’s what today’s gospel is really about. Cheek-turning, coat-sharing, second-mile walking, giving to beggars, praying for persecutors—these were all creative ways for the crowds to resist the oppression of the Roman Empire without using the tools of empire. We are called to be just as creative in our opposition to sin, death and the Devil here and now.

We are called to wholeness. In this way, the Holy Spirit makes us whole like God is whole. That’s what makes us truly God’s children. Let’s pray...

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