

Love your Neighbour who doesn't Think like you

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Just for fun I googled "loving people you don't like" and I found myriad websites all claiming to have the winning formula for how be able to love neighbours with whom we are in conflict. There is a great deal of conflict out there, I'm discovering. The fact is, it is not easy to love a person who doesn't think like me. That person about whom, time and again, you wonder: *What is that person thinking, doing or saying things that they do??*

That, I think, is the challenge Jesus faces with those conniving Pharisees. How do you love people who don't think like you? Jesus would say, "You don't need to like them, but you **do** need to love them!"

Easier said than done.

Today the Pharisees try to entrap Jesus, opening the dialogue with this disingenuous flattery: Teacher... we know that you teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one..." Would you and I have been tempted to roll our eyes at that one?

How easily Jesus could have been baited. Jesus is theologically very similar to those Pharisees. They, and he, believe in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in Resurrection. The Pharisees are just so strict, rigid, though. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus faced significant conflict with Pharisees. In chapter 12 people were hungry on the Sabbath, and so they picked grain from the field. The Pharisees pointed this out to Jesus - this violates the Law, the Torah and its call to honour Sabbath. Jesus responds: If a sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath will the shepherd not pull it out anyway?

In today's encounter Jesus doesn't placate the people with whom he is in conflict. The Pharisees preach about following the Commandments, but do they remember the commandment that,

You shall have no other god before and you shall not make for yourself a graven image

"Do you have a coin?" Jesus asks. They pull out a coin that would have had the graven image of Caesar along with the declaration that he is god. Point made.

Do you have a relationship like that? A sibling, or your parent? Maybe it's a friend whom you love dearly, but sometimes they know how to get a dig in, and it hurts. You may have heard the Buddhist parable from India where a group of people who are blind hear that a strange animal, called an elephant, has been brought to the town. None of them were aware of its shape and form. Curious, they say, "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable."

They find it and they groped about it. The first person, whose hand lands on the trunk, says, "This being is like a thick snake".

For another one whose hand reaches its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, they declared that this elephant is a pillar like a

tree-trunk. The person who placed their hand upon its side says that the elephant, is a wall. Another feels its tail and says the elephant is a rope. The last feels its tusk, stating the elephant must be a spear. They come to blows over their dispute.

It is a humorous picture, this dramatic irony we experience. If only they could see themselves. Can we be like that too sometimes? Clashing particularly with people who are more like us than we wish to admit? Loving does not mean giving in. In fact, love requires that we exercise healthy assertiveness - I use the word assertive, as opposed to aggressive.

Going back to the timeless advice given by the apostle Paul to an obstinate, conflicting church in his time,

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ¹

Doesn't that speak to this time that we live in? "Rejoic(ing) with truth, not delighting in evil." I'm sitting with that specific, poetic, declaration.

Who is that person that you think of when you look at this message saying that "to Love your Neighbour means to love the person *who doesn't think like you*"? Who do you just not see eye-to-eye with? Who pushes your buttons? Who antagonizes you so much that you dig in your heels and stop rejoicing with truth, opting instead to win the argument?

Remember the parable of the blind ones and the elephant. In all of the subjectivity involved in being in relationship, there is also the importance of truth and facts. I can really get going about facts and truth when someone talks to me about the occupation of Palestine. But when I'm talking with a person who genuinely worries about the future of Israel and the well-being of Jews, well, I'm reminded that my truth needs to be tempered with a fervent desire to counter anti-Semitism, and to remember that true and lasting peace means addressing the needs of both parties in conflict. Loving a neighbour, no exceptions, means letting go of simplistic thinking about resolving conflict. Moving from a "win - lose" way of resolution, Jesus calls us to seek the path towards "win - win".

Remember his references throughout the Gospels to God's kin-dom, or realm, where the last shall be first? The meek inheriting the earth? In God's vision, according to Jesus anyway, power and privilege is shared as we come into relationships with humility, compassion, seeing Christ in the one we meet. Let us bring that ethic particularly to our conversations with people who think very differently from us.

Love your neighbours... no exceptions. Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+corinthians+13&version=NIV>

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