



Love is the Truth that Sets us Free

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on July 4, 2021

Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his address to the Episcopal Church’s Executive Council two weeks ago, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry announced that we are preparing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in our church, in all the countries where we are located—in the United States and sixteen other nations in Europe and the Caribbean—to do “what we must do to save our souls from the evils of racism [and] the evils of supremacy of anybody over anybody else.”¹ He called this the “hard and holy work of love.” He has appointed a task force to study how other Anglican churches around the world have done this work—in South Africa with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Rwanda in the aftermath of their genocide, and New Zealand, and I would add in Canada. The task force will make recommendations to General Convention next summer, and the work will proceed.

¹ See Egan Millard, “Presiding Bishop announces new churchwide racial truth and reconciliation effort during first day of Executive Council,” in *Episcopal News Service*, June 25, 2021, accessed July 4, 2021 at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/06/25/presiding-bishop-announces-new-churchwide-racial-truth-and-reconciliation-effort-during-first-day-of-executive-council/>.

And on today, July 4, Independence Day, I am proud and moved to see this. For many years, St. John's has had a tradition of having a special service the Sunday closest to July 4, to have special readings relating to this national holiday—readings that show the truth both of this nation's founding values, and also the ways we have sometimes fallen short of those values. I'll be honest that when I first came to St. John's I was uneasy about bringing July 4 front and center into the life of the church. What about those of us who do not consider ourselves Americans? Regardless of our citizenship, our primary allegiance can never be country; it must always be following Jesus and his Way of Love. Given the increasing dangerous Christian Nationalism in our nation, it's especially important not to conflate faith and empire. But our church is beginning to be humble. It is beginning to recognize that only by telling the truth in gentleness and love, only by allowing ourselves to see fully what our stories have actually been, can we move forward toward healing and justice.

Jesus, in today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, tells us that we must love our enemies. To hear this in the context of beginning the Truth and Reconciliation work, today on July 4, is especially significant. In Jesus' Way of Love, the end goal is always that enemies do not destroy each other or go their separate ways even, but that they truly learn to love one another. You and I all know that in our ordinary state, this is impossible for 99% of us. The hurt and anger runs too deep between those who experience themselves as enemies for love to be part of the equation. When Jesus says, "You must be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect," that makes it even worse, because even if any of us thought there might be a teeny chance we could love our enemies, I sincerely hope

there is not a person in this room who thinks they are or ever could be perfect. But the Greek word for perfect doesn't have the same meaning as the English word perfect, thank God. The word Jesus uses here relates to having a goal or a purpose. It essentially means accomplishing that which you set out to do. It means becoming whole, having integrity.

What Jesus is saying here is that we were made to love one another, and that only by loving everyone—including those who have been enemies—can we fulfill our divine purpose. But an abuser can't just say to the person who has been abused, "Jesus says you should love your enemies, so just forgive me and let's be reconciled." We have to see the harm that has been done, and seek to heal the hurt. To repair the breach. To make amends.

And here is where how Jesus does things and how the world does things are so very different. We can't just study love. We have to experience it. We can read every book ever written, but unless we experience kindness, gentleness, curiosity and respect between those who consider themselves enemies—whether that is white and black, Democrat and Republican, the citizens of different nations, or whatever other line of difference there is—we will never achieve the goal we are seeking.

I recently ran across an interview with Actor Diogo Morgado² who played Jesus Christ in the 2014 movie "Son of God." In this interview, he said that at first, as with any role, he began reading

² See Guideposts Interview of Diogo Morgado, published in Rick Hamlin, "How to Love your Enemies," in *Guideposts Stories of Faith*, April 8, 2019, accessed July 4, 2021 at <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/inspiring-stories/stories-of-faith/how-to-love-your-enemies>.

whatever he could about Jesus, seeing movies portraying Jesus, etc. But he considered that Jesus had changed the life of the world as we know it and was important to a billion people. He realized that no acting skill could help him learn to touch peoples' hearts and to share love as Jesus did. How was he going to do that? So, he said, he realized his preparation needed to be personal, emotional, and spiritual.

He said that there was one scene he was especially proud of. It was the scene where Peter tells Jesus that he would die for him, and Jesus has to tell Peter that no, actually Peter will deny Jesus three times before dawn. Diogo Morgado said that in this scene, as Jesus, at first he believed Peter—that Peter would die for him. Then when God tells him that Peter will in fact deny him, he tells Peter this gently, not in a critical or judging tone, but in the sense of “this is what is going to happen, and I forgive you already.” He was spreading love all the time to everyone, in a way that transcended walls. Diogo Morgado said that after the movie was released he received messages from atheists all over the world, who said that this scene or that line touched him. That's because love is like that. It transcends all walls. It makes possible that which is impossible. It is like water, flowing around and under and over any barriers that we can create.

So the end goal of the life of faith, of following Jesus' Way of Love, is simply, how can we share love in a way that touches people deeply, that transforms lives and hearts? This is such an important question. This is not something we can answer only through what we read about or consider in theory, although those can sometimes be a helpful place to start. It's also not something we can legislate,

although that's important too. If policy and law could eradicate racism, it would have disappeared long ago. But although as a church we are sometimes called to take a stand on laws and policies, our primary role is different. It is to experience being touched personally, deeply, by God in Christ, so that we can share love with one another, in a way that transcends belief, barriers, and all difference of every kind. In a way that heals. Because one person *can* make a difference. Love is contagious.

Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault says that there are basically two reactions we as human beings can have to anything:

... either you will brace, harden, and resist, or you will soften, open, and yield. If you go with the former gesture, you will be catapulted immediately into your smaller self, with its animal instincts and survival responses. If you stay with the latter regardless of the outer conditions, you will remain in alignment with your innermost being, and through it, divine being can reach you . . . Bracing is never worth the cost.³

She goes on to explain that this inner yielding and softening does not mean external surrender or rolling over and playing dead. It is simply keeping the capacity to see truly, in order to move into whatever effortless and nonviolent action is called for in the moment out of the power and motivation of love. This is what Gandhi, and Dr. King, and Jesus all did. It is what we are called to experience and to live, through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

³ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, (Jossey-Bass, 2003) at Location 760 of 1385 (Kindle Cloud Reader).

So on this day, the day this nation celebrates liberty, let us recognize our truest allegiance to Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Let us allow ourselves to be deeply touched by the power of God's personal and intimate love. As our church moves toward the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, let us learn to see and tell the whole truth about our story, both the good and beautiful and also the hatred and the harm. Let us tell this truth in a spirit of humility and openness, knowing that the deepest truth of all is love. We can accept the love and forgiveness of Christ which embraces and holds us even as we face the whole truth. It is precisely this radical, all-encompassing, unconditional love and forgiveness that will empower us to become who we were made to be. It will grant us true freedom, true belonging—a Beloved Community that transcends all the weight of the past, all borders. Love is the truth that sets us free. Amen.