

The week before last Linda and I spent time in Baxter on a mini vacation... I had the opportunity to fish, and she had time to herself. I researched and hired an exceptional guide for two days and was very successful at both fishing and catching fish. More importantly, I had the opportunity to practice civil conversations with John, my guide.

He is a 30+ year teacher of calculus and higher math at Brainard High School, has three very successful children. Two sons are PhD physical therapists, and his daughter the HR Director of a Health Care facility.

Day 1, John wears his NRA hat.

We completed hours of civil conversations.... agreed on many things...children, education, environment, term limits, protection of GLBTQ folks... we did not agree on most progressive gun control objectives, libertarians, role of the federal government, tax reform. We found middle ground on other topics, particularly support for mentally ill persons. I shared with him my peace, and he returned it...

Day 2, he wore a different hat.

Linda can attest that I came home each night with a Pentecostal fire equal to those on the road to Emmaus.

Matthew 10

⁴³⁻⁴⁷ "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that.

I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.

When someone offends you, or when you disagree with indignation and anger, respond with love, the supple moves of prayer, silence.... for then you are working out of your authentic self, blessed and loved by the Creator.

The Creator provides to all of Creation the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—without distinction.... God provides to everyone, and everything regardless of their goodness or badness, their contributions, or their disruptions.

The House of Hillel and the House of Shammai were two rabbinical schools from the first century. These two schools had painful vigorous debates on ritual practice, ethics and theology that lasted for centuries, and are fundamental to the Talmudic stories of Jewish history. Hillel was more

lenient, progressive, and tolerant, and is most common today. Shammai was more conservative, strict, ritualistic.

Some examples of their conflicts:

- Admission to Torah study: Beit Shammai believed only worthy students should be admitted to study Torah. Beit Hillel believed that Torah may be taught to anyone, in the expectation that they will repent and become worthy.
- White lies: Whether one should tell an ugly bride that she is beautiful. Beit Shammai said it was wrong to lie, and Beit Hillel said that all brides are beautiful on their wedding day.
- Divorce: Beit Shammai held that a man may only divorce his wife for a serious transgression, but Beit Hillel allowed divorce for even trivial offenses, such as burning a meal.
- Hanukkah: Beit Shammai held that on the first night eight lights should be lit, and then they should decrease on each successive night, ending with one on the last night; while Beit Hillel held that one should start with one light and increase the number on each night, ending with eight.
- Forgetting to say grace after meals: Beit Shammai says that one who forgot to say Birkat Ham-azon, and had left the place where he ate, should return to that place to recite the prayer. Beit Hillel says that one should recite the prayer in the place where he realizes his omission.

In time both schools were able to agree to call upon God to resolve their disputes. They prayed to God for guidance about which house or school God would sanction. Suddenly, a booming voice from heaven saying, “Both of these are the words of the Living God.” Generations of Rabbis have commented on and taught this story... reminds me of voice from the whirlwind, where were you when I created the whale.

Jesus illumines Loving your neighbor further in Matthew 22. The Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. a lawyer, asked a question designed to test Jesus. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”

If you love only that which is easy to love, do you expect a bonus? Anyone can do that. If you simply nod, smile, or say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? We are surrounded with sinners that provide the same behaviors.

These are challenging texts..

Loving your enemy is not easy. Loving an estranged family member is not easy.

Loving your MAGA neighbor or relative is not easy.

Consider in our time how divided the gap is between us, as Lisa noted last week.

- Armed Insurrections, violence in schools, churches, public venues.
- Supreme Court Decisions that overturn decades of settled law
- Distorted facts promoted by a minority vs facts recognized by a majority
- Plunder and Destruction of creation without remorse
- Militarization of Christianity

I confess it is sometimes very hard, challenging, almost impossible to love my enemies.. many of you know that I am a conscientious objector, I was provided that status in the midst of the Viet Nam Conflict. It was a long painful challenging process. More importantly to this Gospel and my own sinfulness, it took me a long time to open up to Viet Nam vets. I regret that bias.

When you listen to Jesus primary commandment, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, what is your primary first response?

Consider for a moment someone that you simply cannot love?

Don't answer that with an historical figure, Hitler for example, but an individual in your personal context...family, neighbor, co-worker.

What is your path forward in love? Where do you begin your civil conversation?

I trust Jesus knew this about us, as we are frequently challenged by this teaching... again and again we were sent and challenged to love our enemies..

Jesus also gave us guidelines...consider these passages from the synoptic gospels...

Luke 10:1

He gave them this charge:³“On your way! But be careful—this is hazardous work. You’re like lambs in a wolf pack.

⁴“Travel light. Comb and toothbrush and no extra luggage.

⁵⁻⁶“When you enter a home, greet the family, ‘Peace.’ If your greeting is received, then it’s a good place to stay. But if it’s not received, take it back and get out. Don’t impose yourself.

¹⁰⁻¹²“When you enter a town and are not received, go out in the street and say, ‘The only thing we got from you is the dirt on our feet, and we’re giving it back. Did you have any idea that God’s kingdom was right on your doorstep?’ Sodom will have it better on Judgment Day than the town that rejects you.

Matthew 10

“Don’t begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don’t try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in your neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

¹²⁻¹⁵“When you knock on a door, be courteous in your greeting. If they welcome you, be gentle in your conversation. If they don’t welcome you, quietly withdraw. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.

¹⁶“Stay alert. This is hazardous work I’m assigning you. You’re going to be like sheep running through a wolf pack, so don’t call attention to yourselves. Be as shrewd as a snake, inoffensive as a dove.

Mark 6:6

⁷⁻⁸ Jesus called the Twelve and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority

⁸⁻⁹“Don’t think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. *You* are the equipment.

¹¹“If you’re not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.”

¹²⁻¹³ Then they were on the road. They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; right and left they sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

Adaptive leadership is the capacity to move people to challenge tough problems that they would rather avoid. Jesus assumed that as a fundamental truth of organizing.

Jesus is directing us in these sending stories or commissions to keep moving, to mature.... to share our love and our stories...and when that Holy Spirit is working within us, dividing walls will be crushed.

We are called to have civil conversations, to tell our stories. We are not called to overwhelm those we disagree with, nor demand confession or compliance.

We are called to tell our faith stories because if we do not, other voices will rise up with fake news, distortions of who God is and what God expects from us.

Some as we know, will lie in God's name, will use God as a weapon, and others have lost their relationship with God, and feel abandoned by Jesus.

I am reading a provocative book written by an Evangelical, Kristen Kobes, Jesus and John Wayne... a frightening history of Evangelical Militancy... their influence in these times, the distortion of facts and theology, and as the fracture between Hillel and Shammai illustrates the long history of the breach within Christendom.

She writes regarding the 2016 election:

Masculine authority, militarism, and the sexual and spiritual subordination of women have simply been part of the air evangelicals breathe for decades. Evangelical fears were real. Yet these fears were not simply a natural response to changing times. For decades, evangelical leaders had worked to stoke them. Their own power depended on it. Men like James Dobson, Bill Gothard, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Mark Driscoll, Franklin Graham, and countless lesser lights invoked a sense of peril in order to offer fearful followers their own brand of truth and protection. Generations of evangelicals learned to be afraid of communists, feminists, liberals, secular humanists, "the homosexuals," the United Nations, the government, Muslims, and immigrants — and they were primed to respond to those fears by looking to a strong man to rescue them from danger, a man who embodied a God-given, testosterone-driven masculinity.

⁴⁸ “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You are members of the Reign of Heaven, act accordingly. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward each other, the way God loves and nourishes you.”

For the next twenty years the Court will likely remain in the hands of a conservative bloc committed to protecting the current distribution of wealth and power in the United States. The recent decisions of these justices and their ideological handlers will continue to prevent congress and states from imposing serious restraints on the power of empire, or reversing the disenfranchisement of poor and minority groups, the dismantling of material, safety, gun violence, and health protections won over the course of the past sixty years, and the loss of important rights for women, the GLBTQ+ community, immigrants, and minorities .

We need much more than a political revolution; we also need a moral, cultural, and spiritual revolution — an awakening to the dignity and value of each and every one of us no matter who we are, where we came from, or what we’ve done It is this revolutionary spirit — a revolutionary love for all people and for life itself — that will ultimately determine our collective fate. (Reference Bp Curry)

Michelle Alexander (New Jim Crow)

Jesus calls us to love one another, and to move from the pew to the public forum with our love centered instincts, practice and hopes. We are called to mission to participate as co-creators of the reign of heaven, to have a world that would mature and be nurtured in joy and compassion and manifest the hopeful spirit filled part of our souls. We are called to repair the breach, to repair our global environment, and to be agents of healing and to change our nationalistic distortions of white male privilege, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, classism.

Jesus has called and blessed us to do this work...We will, with God’s Help release our fear, pain, anger, and distortions that have led us to abandon hope.

Gospel of John ³⁴⁻³⁵ “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other.”

If it is not about Love, it is not about God. Amen.

Rex McKee