



SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Year A

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18
Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13
1 Corinthians 3:16-23
Matthew 5:38-48

Gathering

(An unlit candle, a Bible open to this week's gospel and a green plant rest on a table covered with green cloth.)

This week we consider a challenge from Jesus that seems at best counter-intuitive. He asks us to love those who least deserve our compassion, and to love them as the Father loves us. Last week, we were challenged not only with the need to make choices, but with the call to choose with love. What kinds of choices did you make this past week?

Prayer

(The leader lights the candle and invites the members to experience a moment of silent reflection on the bounty of God's unique love for each of us. A selection of instrumental music is played. When the music is complete, the prayer continues as follows.)

Leader: Dear Child of God, if we are truly to understand that God loves all of us, we must recognize that He loves our enemies, too. God does not share our hatred, no matter

what the offense we have endured. We try to claim God for ourselves and for our cause, but God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict or to any one religion. And our prejudices, regardless of whether they are based on religion, race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or anything else, are absolutely and utterly ridiculous in God's eyes.

When we see others as the enemy, we risk becoming what we hate. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. All of our humanity is dependent on recognizing the humanity in others.

God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time by Desmond Tutu Copyright 2004 Reprinted by permission of Doubleday Publishers.

All: Lord, teach us to love with the heart of your Son.

HEARING THE LORD'S GOSPEL

(The scriptures are proclaimed aloud with a pause after each reading. Following a pause after the proclamation of the gospel, the leader invites members to name a word or phrase from the gospel that stays with them, but without any additional comment. Some may repeat what another has already said.)

When this naming is complete, the leader passes out copies of the scriptures of the week as needed. Pausing between them, the leader then poses these two questions: "What draws you to this gospel?" "Where do you resist this gospel?" The community pauses for a time of silent reflection. After about a minute, the leader invites members to consider the Reflection and Questions for the week. After a time for silent reflection, the leader invites members to re-arrange themselves in groups of three or four for sharing. The small groups move off so as not to intrude on one another.)

Reflection

This reading from Matthew's gospel challenges us to become perfect in a way that's hard to wrap our heads around. Jesus doesn't just suggest that we ignore our enemies, he instructs us to go out of our way to show them

love and compassion. He doesn't distinguish between enemies we know and those who are strangers to us; he doesn't allow for degrees of evil-doing, or qualify how much love we must offer. To be perfect, as the Father is perfect, we need to offer love without condition or reserve.

I may be able to feel a dispassionate kind of love toward someone I have never met, but is that what Jesus is asking? What about that person I encounter regularly who is aggravating, argumentative, mean or just unfamiliar? Can I offer that person my best self, regardless of how I am treated (or mistreated) in return? Can I pray for the foreign soldier whose goal is to inflict harm? Or for the politician who aggressively promotes policies that run counter to my values and beliefs? Or for the criminal who has committed an unspeakable act?

Jesus calls us to be perfect, to love our neighbors as ourselves – *all* of our neighbors. He calls us to become like him, and he offers us the grace to experience a change of heart, to grow in holiness and perfection if we choose to follow his way. It is a path that seems counter-intuitive in today's culture. Are we rewarding bad behavior with kindness? The truth is that one kindness toward an enemy, one unearned act of love or respect or compassion, can change the trajectory of not only a single relationship, but maybe even of a whole society.

Through Jesus, God has shown us that truth. He sent his son to live and die among us. That single act of love has rippled through two thousand years, leading us toward the perfection God has intended for us from the beginning.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

- ◆ When have you experienced an act of love or kindness that you didn't deserve? How did you feel? How did it affect your own behavior or relationships?
- ◆ What obstacles hinder you from offering love or kindness to someone who has hurt or disrespected you?
- ◆ When have you responded with grace and generosity to someone who did not deserve such a response? How was your response received?
- ◆ What messages of society or the media undermine Jesus' command to "love your enemies"? How influenced are you by these messages awash in the culture today?

HEARING THE GOSPEL'S LORD

(After about fifteen minutes of sharing in threes/fours, the leader re-gathers the community. Once back together, members pause for a moment. The leader then poses these questions: "What do you want to hold on to for yourself from this session?" "How are you/we being called to live in response to God's word?" After a pause, the leader invites the community to a time of conversation. When this sharing is complete, the community moves to a time of prayer.)

Response in Action Suggestions

- ◆ Read Desmond Tutu's book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, to learn about the time of apartheid in South Africa and the country's efforts to heal the wounds of hate. This book explores how individual and global suffering can be transformed into joy and redemption.
- ◆ Set aside twenty minutes some day this week for reflection and prayer. Slowly read over the *Sermon on the Mount* as found in Matthew 5-7. Reflect on some choices you've made and how they compare to the vision of the *Sermon on the Mount*.
- ◆ Visit or volunteer at an area shelter or soup kitchen. While there, make a special effort to greet someone whom you might otherwise avoid, and show him/her the care and respect that you might reserve for a friend.

Prayer

(After a brief pause, the gospel or a portion of it, either of the other readings as appropriate or the responsorial psalm are proclaimed. The idea is to select a text that lends itself to inviting members to the time of silent prayer that follows. Following the proclamation, the leader poses these questions to the members: "What does Christ in his Spirit say to you now?" "What do you say to him in response?" The community pauses for a full five minutes of prayerful attention to God. A brief instrumental selection may be played during part of this time. After this time of silence, the leader invites members simply to mention a word or two, or a brief expression that

captures what they hear Christ saying to them personally. The community receives this without additional comment.

Following this sharing, several members lead the community in prayer as follows.)

Seeing with God's Eyes

I: We must come to know that each of us is linked in the chain of our common humanity. God dwells in each of us.

All: Lord, help us to see.

II: God dwells in each of us even when we are unaware of it. It is radical not only in the sense that it is revolutionary. It is radical in that it is, literally, at the root of everything. And this is something that can't change, not even in the worst human being.

All: Lord, help us to see.

III: The God who dwells in us is a part of us that cannot be destroyed. That is why we can never give up on anybody.

All: Lord, help us to see.

IV: With God's eyes we see our enemies as they are - a bundle of incomprehensible hurts and hatreds, anger sheathed in human form. And we see them as they truly are – people made in God's own image, with hopes, loves, laughter, blood, and tears like ours.

All: Lord, help us to see.

Made for Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference by Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu.
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(Members join in singing, "Where Charity and Love Prevail." The song may be found on the Internet When the song is complete, members exchange a sign of peace.)