

“Plain Talk”

Luke 6:20-31

Year after year after year, for 108 years, all they could do was hope. Those lovable losers, the Chicago Cubs fans, finally realized their fondest hopes this week: their team is now World Series champions.

Our former pastoral resident, Scott Dickison, is a lifelong Cubs fan, as was his father before him. A year ago, the Cubs were swept in four games by the New York Mets in the National League Championship Series. The next night, Scott’s two-year-old son, who had gotten used to watching his dad watch the Cubs go down to defeat night after night, asked, “Daddy, where baseball game?” Scott said: *I looked at him in a way I imagine my father once looked at me and told him those words that every Cub fan learns at far too early an age: “Son, there’s no more baseball this season. We’ll have to wait ’til next year.”*¹

Well, at long last, baseball justice has been done. Dreams have come true. And those fans who have gone on to their eternal reward without seeing victory in their lifetimes are now celebrating above as Cubs fans are below. For more than a century, Cubs fans learned that loyalty is not about what happens when things are going well, but when things are going badly. There’s no such thing as a part-time Cubs fan: you’re in for thick or thin, or you aren’t in at all.

Today is All Saints Sunday in the church. We remember those who have gone on to their heavenly reward without seeing all the fruits of their faithfulness come to fruition in this life. They lived and died without knowing the full joy of their labors. But their lives inspire us still. And they inspire us precisely because of the way they lived when it was hard. It was their character that counted. And their character was proved by how they lived during tough times.

Our lectionary text for today is from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain in Luke. I told you last week about the contrast between Matthew’s Gospel,

¹ <https://baptistnews.com/article/next-year-people/#.WB-vpXfMyV5>

which records Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and Luke's version from down on level ground. Luke's Jesus has a variation on the Beatitudes that includes a series of woes with the blessings. Blessed are the poor; woe to the rich. Blessed are those who hunger now; woe to those who are perpetually stuffed. Blessed are those who weep now; woe to those who can't stop laughing in this life. Blessed are those who are hated and reviled in this life; woe to those who are spoken well of only now. In each case there is a promise of table-turning to come.

The Christian faith is always future-focused. God is doing something in the world to bring about a time of perfect peace and justice. The inequalities and injustices of this life, the losses and sorrows, will come to an end. The dream of God for all creation will someday come true. And those who lived loyally in pursuit of that dream will know the joy of it when it comes. Those who resist it and prosper now at the expense of others will be sorry later.

Jesus continues the Sermon on the Plain, or what I am calling Plain Talk, by giving explicit instructions on how to live in hope in the meantime. The summary of all he says is this: live now as if the time of vindication has already come. Live now as if victory is finally yours. Live now as if God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Listen again to these astonishing words of Jesus: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ... Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Up to this time in Jewish tradition, the prime directive was to love one's neighbor. Jesus also said that on numerous occasions. But the great debate among the rabbis was always the question, *Who is my neighbor?* That appears in Luke's Gospel in the remarkable parable that Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan. While tradition was always trying to limit who the neighbor was in order to know where to draw the line on love, Jesus erased the line altogether. Love everyone, he says. Love those close to you. Love those far from you. Love those who love you. Love those who hate you. Love them all.

Amy-Jill Levine is Jewish, but she teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School. One of the great gifts she gives to the church is to keep

us mindful of the Jewish background and assumptions behind the words of the Christian Scriptures. But at this point, she finds no real parallel to Jesus' teaching that we love our enemies. This is an unprecedented "Jesus variation."

During the time of Jesus, we are told in the Jewish Talmud, a Gentile approached the two great rabbis of that time, seeking to convert but impatient with the long process of learning Torah in order to know how to live as a Jew. He challenged them: one was the strict Shammai, and the other—the more-liberal Hillel—was to teach him Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai dismissed him as unserious. Hillel accepted the challenge. He said this: *Whatever is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of Torah. The rest is commentary. Go now and learn.*

This is the religious version of the medical mandate called the Hippocratic Oath: *First, do no harm.* And the first way to do no harm in relationships is to resist the impulse to hate or to retaliate in any way.

Almost a decade before his death, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on loving one's enemies at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He actually believed that these words of Jesus were so important that he tried to preach on this subject every year, adding more and more layers to his understanding of it and trying his best to live it out amid the terrible times of hatred and persecution that he and black Americans faced daily in those days. I read his 1957 sermon this week. In it he said that the first thing to do when you are inclined to hate and not love someone who has hurt or abused you is to look deeply and honestly at yourself. The reason, he said, is to remind yourself that it takes two to make for enmity. It is unlikely that all hatred and abuse springs solely from a guilty person or group that opposes or oppresses you. If you can own up to your own participation in the conflict, you will have greater sympathy for your enemy.

Next, he says, when you look at your enemies, look not only to that part of them that you deem evil; look at the good in them first. No one is all bad or all good. By refusing to treat someone who has hurt or harmed you in some way as pure evil, you create the conditions to one day find

that person again in friendship.²

This is so important in our time. We are in an election week in our country and in our church. We will vote in both cases on matters that have divided us. We have different visions of how to fulfill our hopes and dreams, of what these communities should look like. And along the way, we have sometimes hurt one another and closed our hearts to each other. Some have determined that it is better to live without one another than with one another. Some would rather move to Canada than live in a future in our country under the administration of the one they didn't vote for. Some would rather move to another church than live under the conditions of a future determined by a vote they didn't support. But by doing so, we only prove that the way the world operates is the only way open to us.

I am aware that this may be the last time many of us will worship together. If you are one of those who have already decided that you are leaving, I have something to say to you: Thank you. Thank you for all the years of sacrifice and service. Thank you for the gifts of time, talents and treasure that you have given to make us the church we are today. And if you wonder how you will be remembered after you leave, I will tell you: You will be recorded among the saints of this church. No one wants to be judged on the basis of one decision or snapshot of time in a life. So we will bless you and miss you.

And for those of you who are undecided, I want to say that there is a place for you here. It may be hard, but it can be good. *A good life, not an easy life*, don't you know?! Let's prove the gospel together by staying together. But whether you leave or stay, don't let hatred or bitterness or resentment rule your heart.

Antoine Leiris lost his wife in the ISIS-inspired Islamic terror attacks in Paris last November. He was left with a young son who would afterward be motherless. Leiris wrote a Facebook post the next day that went viral. In it he defiantly declared, *You will not have my hate*. When asked a

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http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documententry/doc_loving_your_enemies.1.html

year later about it, he said this, referring mainly to his duty toward his son: *When you're a kid, what you need is protection and so I wanted to make sure he felt secure. And by secure I mean emotionally secure and secure because I took care of him. And if I let this feeling [of hate] enter into our lives, it would have taken up all the space in our lives. ... In our hearts everything would have been heavy and I wanted our lives to be light again. ... He has the right to not worry about everything all the time. He's just a child. So I had to protect him from that feeling [of hate]. He's going to keep growing and growing, and that feeling cannot dominate his life.*³

There is a cost to us when we hate someone else. So first, as Hillel taught, do not do what is hateful. But there is more that Jesus offers. It isn't enough to resist hating or retaliating; you have to do good toward the one who has hurt or hated you. This is the positive content of Jesus' Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

In his *Second Inaugural Address*, President Abraham Lincoln acknowledged something mystifying about those on either side of the Civil War: *Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. ... let us judge not, that we be not judged.* He then ended with these immortal words to heal the nation: *With malice toward none, and charity for all ...*⁴

Charity is a King James word for love. Divine love. The kind of love we are commanded to have for our enemies, who are really our fellows, whether we want to acknowledge them as such or not.

After another hard election in 2001, President George W. Bush said these profound words in his first inaugural address: *Sometimes our differences run so deep, it seems we share a continent but not a country. We do not accept this, and we will not allow it. Our unity, our union, [are] the serious work of leaders and citizens in every generation. And this is my solemn pledge: I will work to build a single nation of justice and*

³ <https://www.onfaith.co/discussion/onfaith-conversations-antoine-leiris-author-of-you-will-not-have-my-hate>

⁴ <http://www.nationalcenter.org/LincolnSecondInaugural.html>

*opportunity.*⁵

The words of these presidents echo the words of Jesus and the examples of the saints. Let us not give up hope, and let us not give up on one another. The answer for the country and the answer for the church are the same: love.

At least that's what Jesus says. Now what do we say?

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/one-final-election-plea-on-the-behalf-of-us-ideals/2016/11/03/4975a1c4-a1dd-11e6-a44d-cc2898cfab06_story.html