

February 24, 2019
7th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Nathan Empsall
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

May I speak with God, Creator, Word, and Holy Spirit.

Last month, my wife Diana and I finished a three-week trip to Ireland and the United Kingdom. One of the highlights for us both was New Year's Day in Belfast. "I had a great holiday in Belfast" is not something you might have expected to hear just 25 years ago, but that's part of why it was such a highlight. We went on a three-hour political walking tour of the neighborhoods at the heart of the violent "Troubles," a tour led by former political prisoners from both sides. Such a tour wouldn't have been possible even one generation ago.

As a quick refresher, the island of Ireland has 32 counties. Twenty-six of them have been an independent country, the Republic of Ireland, for about 100 years. The other six counties make up Northern Ireland, which remains part of the United Kingdom. Belfast is their capital. "The Troubles" began in the late 1960s and lasted until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Republicans, or Irish Nationalists, wanted one united and independent Ireland. Most, but not all, were Catholic. The unionists, or loyalists, wanted Northern Ireland to remain with the UK. Most, but not all, were Protestant. Most residents wanted to have this debate in peace, but some didn't, creating a radicalized city police force and violent paramilitaries on both sides. Over the course of 30 years, 10,000 bombs killed 3,500 people, many of them innocent bystanders.

Flash forward to Belfast, 2019. There hasn't been an attack since 2001. The army is gone. The walls dividing the sectarian neighborhoods are still there, but they're covered in peace murals, and the gates are open during the day.

It was in this new world that Diana and I found ourselves outside Divis Tower, the site of a 1969 riot where nine-year-old Catholic Patrick Rooney became the first child killed in the Troubles. Our first tour guide of the day had been Paddy's childhood friend.

For the next 90 minutes, we were led by Robert, a former nationalist prisoner who served time for weapons possession and downtown bombings. Then for the final 90 minutes, we were led by Noel, a former Unionist prisoner who committed 30 armored robberies and I don't know how many murders, some of them assassinations, some of them random shootings of innocent pedestrians in cold blood.

Meeting Robert and Noel on New Year's Day, the eighth day of Christmas, was like meeting Ebenezer Scrooge, the Grinch, or the Apostle Paul in person. Redemption is real. No one can ever tell me that people can't change; I've seen the proof. Neither guide bore any resemblance to the man he used to be. Sure, both still hold to some form of their original politics, yet they each now value peace and love far more than any of that. 40 years ago, they shot at each other. Today, they joke, embrace, and pose for pictures. They both work to teach Belfast's youth: Don't do what I did. I was wrong. There is a better way. The Way of Love.

The nationalist's grandfather was killed by a bomb at a pub. One of the other Loyalist tour guides in this program is the son of the man who set off that bomb. Can you imagine?

"Your dad killed my grandfather! And we still believe the same things that led them to that fight!... I've got an idea: Let's lead peace tours together and shake hands, every single week."

"I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... Love your enemies."

Love. Whether it's amidst violent sectarian conflicts like Ireland's, amidst nasty racially charged politics like America's, or amidst the smaller struggles of daily life with family, friends, and co-workers, love is the only way. When we love, it can change the world. It can change New Haven. It can change our lives.

These tour guides remind me of today's Old Testament lesson. Joseph was beaten to a pulp by his own brothers, and then when he was on death's door, they sold him into slavery. Joseph managed to rise up from slavery and become the Pharaoh's right-hand. Now he has power and wealth. Now he can get revenge on those who hurt him! But instead, he offers forgiveness. He offers love, and even shares his wealth and power.

When it comes to the division racking America today, can we be like those tour guides? Holding to our values yet still shaking hands, listening to one another, and admitting that we can be wrong? And when it comes to our own daily lives, can we be like Joseph, radically sharing our love, forgiveness, and resources with those who couldn't love us first?

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them... Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

Love is important, because it's not just a cliché, or a sappy Hallmark card. Love is a powerful, transformative force that can heal wounds, forge relationships, move mountains, and even topple corrupt governments. Jesus didn't teach love to make us feel good: He taught it to change the world.

Take this verse we just heard in Luke's Sermon on the Plain: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also." It's ever-so-slightly different in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew, Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Strikes you on the right cheek. Think about that. Most people are right handed. How does a right-handed person strike a right cheek? It's a backhand. (Otherwise you have to twist your wrist all funny.) A backhand is the type of blow a master would use against a slave, an adult against a child, and in a twisted patriarchal society, a man against a woman. It's the type of blow that wrongly says, "You are beneath me, remember your place." It's the type of blow that a Roman citizen would use against a Jewish peasant. Some scholars suggest that Jesus is thus telling his Jewish audience to turn their left cheek to the Roman soldier and say, "No, you don't backhand me like a slave. Slap me: I am your equal." This is non-violent resistance of an oppressive regime. Non-violent, because it is resistance rooted in love. For in the very same breath that Jesus teaches how to fight oppression, he also says do to others as you would have them do to you. Love can bring down governments; love can change the world.

And that means that with love, and with God, you and I can change the world.

Love is an easy message to preach. And love is an easy message to agree with. But love isn't always easy to live. We nod at the Golden rule as if it's obvious – "Do to others as you would have them do to you." And yet, love is not the norm in our society, and perhaps not even in our own lives. If love was easy, Jesus wouldn't have had to spend so much time talking about it. Love is truly radical, it's deeply counter-cultural... and it's hard.

I don't hide the fact that I'm a pretty liberal guy. But I can't count the number of fellow liberals I've heard, family and friends, who say the words out loud, "I hate Donald Trump, I hate him I hate him I hate him." And how many friends have I seen write on Facebook that they are sick not just of Trump, but of his supporters, who they're cutting out of their lives?

On the flip side, how many nasty things have I heard conservative relatives say about "Killary" Clinton? How much bigoted invective was thrown at the women who spoke up for her, or against Black Lives Matter protestors who simply try to show us that the American experience is not the same for everyone? How many alleged Christians have I seen take great joy in mocking "libtards" – or, on the flip side, in feeling smugly superior to "Rethuglican" evangelicals?

More importantly, how many times have I thought some of these things myself?

Later in Luke, Jesus will warn us against these attitudes. Don't be like the Pharisee, Jesus says, who prays, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." Instead, pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Our response to hearing these commandments of love can't be to say, I know which mean family members, cyberbullies, and politicians need to hear THIS message! It needs to be, where in my own life am I not living into this message? Paul tells us in today's second lesson, "If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body." That means that from Donald to Hillary, from my best friend to my school bully, every single one of the earth's eight billion humans has a spiritual side I can't see. Every single one of us is made in the image of God. And God can pull something good and beautiful out of anyone, even when I can't see it. So the question I need to ask myself is, who is it that I am failing to love?

It's not just politics. It's daily life. When a friend tells boring stories, when another car cuts us off, when a classmate calls us names, or when a spouse leaves dirty glasses all over the house, do we acknowledge that it's not a big deal, remind ourselves that this person bears the image of God, and accept the temporary annoyance with patience and love? Or do we get short and snippy?

(To be clear, I'm the spouse who leaves the dirty glasses everywhere, and I can get snippy.)

It's easy to say, my religion is about love. It's easy to repeat, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." But I've learned the hard way, as I think all of us have, that it's a lot harder to live that way. And that's why Jesus says, don't judge.

It's also why Jesus said on the cross, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.

That's the best news of all: Just like my Irish tour guides, and just like Joseph's brothers, by the glorious grace of God all of us are forgiven and given countless chances to try again, and again and again. Yesterday's failures don't have to matter. With every new day, Jesus is there, calling us to start over and to try and offer our love once more.

In our baptismal vows, we promise to persevere in resisting evil and to strive for justice. That means our faith as Christians calls us to walk away from abusers—to pray for them, yes, by name, but not to enable them. Our faith calls us to oppose actions that create climate change, and that hurt every living thing on this planet. Our faith calls us to stand up to leaders who use the rhetoric of fear to divide us, who tell us we need walls to separate us from our neighbors, and who encourage us to hate journalists, protestors, people of color, LGBT persons, or immigrants.

We are called to resist evil, yes, but we are also called to root that resistance in love. Love for those whom our resistance protects, and also love for those whom we resist. Every single person is made in the image of God, and we have to find a way to love *all* of them.

That kind of radical love doesn't start in Belfast. It doesn't start in 1st century Israel. It doesn't even start in Washington, D.C. It starts right here in New Haven. May it start right here at St. Thomas's. May we show love to one another as we discuss the future of this parish, and as we share differing viewpoints on its transitions and fiscal threats.

And may we remember that Sunday morning is not just about refreshing us for the rest of the week, but about forming us for the rest of our lives. May we carry that love out those doors, and share it with every Republican, every Democrat; every homeless person; every Muslim, evangelical, and atheist, every sexist coworker; and every annoying person we meet, whether stranger, enemy, or friend.

Because every single one of them bears the image of God—and so do you.

You are so loved. Accept it, and spread it.

Amen.