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Sunday, February 14, 2010

Sermon Texts: Genesis 45: 11, 15
Psalm 103
Luke 6: 27-38
I Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50

Sermon Title: "The Wit to Win"

Sermon Topic: Christian handling of hurt and rejection

Sermon Purpose: To teach just how Christ wants us to love our enemies.

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Sermon Prayer: O God, let your gospel come to us not in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In a brief but powerful poem entitled "Outwitted," Edwin Markham wrote these words of wisdom:

"He drew a circle and shut him out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in."

A person wonders if Markham's poem is an account of a problem he had with someone who had rejected him. It appears, if the poem is autobiographical, that some man simply shut Markham out. He called Markham such names as "heretic," and "rebel." Worse yet, the man treated Markham like a thing – "a thing to flout," not as a person deserving dignity and respect.

How did Markham handle the problem? He used the greatest weapon known to man. He used love! As he put it: "Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him in."

Some people, today, might say: "Love your enemies. It plays with their heads."

Love is the Christian way to deal with enemies.

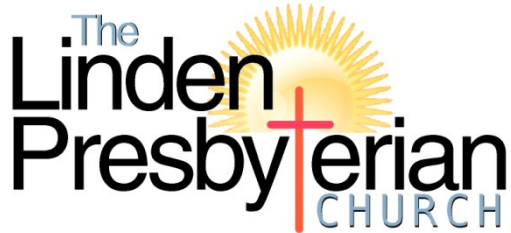
What we see here is the Christian way to deal with problems in human relationships. What we have here, our Lord would say, is the proper response to one's enemies.

This is the way Christ put it: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

It sounds radical, doesn't it? I have no doubt that it sounds nonsensical to many. Loving one's enemies is certainly not our natural (or what we accept as a normal) response to rejection, insult, or hurt. Don't we immediately plot revenge? Don't we consider how we can get back at those who have assaulted us by their cruel words and deeds?

When our good name is besmirched, when our livelihood is put at risk, when a family member is abused or humiliated, what is our natural inclination? Isn't it to get even, or to make them suffer just





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as much as (if not more than) we have? Isn't our "normal" reaction some type of hateful revenge? Many of us teach our children, "Don't you start a fight. But, if someone else starts a fight with you, you – by damned – better make sure you finish it." Isn't that what many consider to be "normal?"

When the Spanish patriot, Ramon Navarez, lay dying, a priest asked him if he forgave his enemies. Navarez replied: "Father, I have none. I shot them all."

Of course, we do have to deal with conflicts. We can't be doormats! Even our Lord Jesus Christ was not one to simply lie down and let his enemies abuse him without a response. But, his response was always a positive one. What did he do? He confronted their evil with his unrestrained goodness. He prayed for his enemies, asking God to forgive them. He responded to the awful hurt and cruelty with unusual caring. Luke tells us about what happened when one of Jesus' disciples (presumably Peter) grabbed a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. "No more of this!" Christ said firmly. Then he touched the man's ear and healed him. (Luke 22: 47ff)

Has anyone ever accused Jesus of being spineless? I hardly think so! He stood up to his enemies and met their attacks with goodwill and love and unwavering forgiveness. In every way, Jesus practiced what he preached.

Christian love makes sense.

Was Jesus right, or was he wrong? Well, consider the alternatives. First of all, there's revenge. Now, it certainly can't be the best solution because revenge only begets revenge. Retaliation only results in more (and more violent) retaliation. (Remember the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor? It resulted in dropping the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Should America simply have rolled over and played dead? No way! Remember 911? We're still embroiled in the aftermath of that. Should we just move on as if nothing happened? No! But violence only begets violence.) Trying to "get even" only leaves everyone worse off with each offense committed. In this "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" world, ultimately anyone left will be blind and toothless.

The bottom line is that only Christian love makes any sense. This is because only Christ-like love dissipates hatred. Only Christ-like love preserves the dignity and the honor of everyone involved in a conflict. Only Christ-like love reaches out with goodwill seeking to be reconciled with those in opposition.

Listen to these moving words spoken by a black Christian pastor during the struggle of his people for equality and for the right to vote:

"To our most bitter enemies we say, 'We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force ... Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for





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ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.” (The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in his sermon: **Loving Your Enemies.**)

Now, think whatever you will about him as a person and as a political activist. Nevertheless, this man knew what Jesus was saying and what Jesus taught from the Scriptures.

Did you hear what Dr. King said? He was hinting at what Markham postulated when he wrote concerning his dealing with his enemy: “Love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that took him in.”

God is in the process.

Really, there is only one way to deal with an enemy. That’s to unite with love and, thereby, gain the wit and wisdom to win a new relationship. Abraham Lincoln had it right when he said, “The quickest way I know to get rid of an enemy is to make a friend of him.”

Some will say that’s “impossible.” Others will protest, “It’s unlikely.” Still others will refer to it as “daydreaming.”

Such objections fail to take one, simple factor into consideration. It’s the presence of God in the situation. Isn’t it true that God wants us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves? Is God absent when we pray about our relationships with others? When we pray our Lord’s Prayer and ask God to forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” is God not listening? Doesn’t God care?

What we’re saying is that God’s in the process when it comes to our getting along with others. God wants us to be reconciled with our sisters and brothers, to live in harmony with them. God, therefore, can be counted on to work in the hearts and minds of our enemies, even as God works in our own. “Love and I,” wrote Markham, capitalizing the word, Love, “Love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and too him in.”

To put it in a single sentence: When we unite with the love of God, we discover the clue to winning in our relationships with others. Amen.

Let us pray:

Loving God; help us to maintain the capacity to deal with our enemies in a caring, considerate manner. Help us to pray for them, to hope for them, and to struggle through our own hurt and anger to deal with them, as our Lord Jesus would have us to do. Help us to be so strong in our convictions (and unwavering in Christian justice and righteousness), that only the truth and the common good are essential in both our lives; the truth and the common good that God provides by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

