

Pentecost 17
September 7, 2008
The Rev. David W. Lovelace

The problem is that God is a dreamer. God seems to think we can have a world where everyone gets along. All you have to do is love your neighbor as yourself. God seems to think the lion and lamb can lie down together, that guns and tanks can be beaten into plowshares, and all creation can live in harmony with one another. God actually wants us to love genuinely. God is a dreamer.

To begin with we live in a culture that makes it difficult to love ourselves. The culture values certain characteristics: beauty, power, youth, strength, intelligence, wealth - if we don't have these characteristics we are aware of what we lack. If we do possess these characteristics then we are convinced we are not appreciated for who we are just the eternalists that we possess. It is really hard to love ourselves. God has to be a dreamer.

Then there is this bit about loving our neighbor. Obviously God never lived in York, PA. How many of us even know our neighbors? Our lives are much too busy for neighborhood chats or visiting in each other's homes.

I recall as a child back in the dark ages in the South many nights this time of the year spent on the front porch. Our homes were not air conditioned and so it was cooler outside than it was inside until the sun had long been set in the west. Most of our neighbors were outside as well. Being outside, the children played with one another and adults sat on the porch and talked. There was very little that went on in the neighborhood that we did not know about. There was never, to my knowledge, a need of some one of our neighbors that was not met by some other neighbor who had the knowledge or ability to respond. I think it is that kind of love that Jesus was talking about. The kind of genuine love that looks out for one another. The kind of genuine love that shares graciously and willingly. The kind of genuine love that is more about community than individualism.

Jesus goes on to talk about loving our enemies. I know God is a dreamer if God thinks we can love our enemies. We have been told over and over to be mindful of terrorists. We have been led to believe that if certain people obtain certain knowledge they will use that knowledge against us. We have it ingrained that we must not trust

our enemies. We cannot love our enemies because if we did they would not be enemies anymore.

One of the things that keeps us from loving others is our fear that if we do love as God wants we might be hurt. Hurt happens all the time. Often it is unintended but nevertheless it is painful. Whether it is a minor snub, being lied to, intolerance, violence or just plain lack of respect, we do not want to take a chance that we may be hurt by a relationship. Loving as God proposes we love seems all but impossible. We know how hard it is to live in community with each other. Most of us struggle to know how to respond to the pain we encountered in our world.

Then we hear the Gospel for today in which Jesus tells us what we must do if we are hurt or wronged by someone in the community. The assumption is that the community is a close knit group of committed people. I know of few communities in our radically individualistic, litigious society that can afford to act in the manner prescribed by Jesus. But, let's not be too hasty and simply write this passage off.

Jesus knows that sin happens. There are times when we wrong one another. Rather than just ignore the wrong and hope our hurt feelings will go away, Jesus suggests that we go talk to the person privately. Don't make a big scene. Be sure to have the facts before we accuse anyone of anything. Go have a private, reasonable conversation. If the person is willing and open to listening they will hear what we have to say and the relationship can be restored.

If the person cannot hear what we have to say and if we cannot reach some understanding then Jesus suggests we take a friend or two with us to continue the effort to heal the relationship. If that does not work then take it to the community. Ask the community to assist us to be reconciled with one another. Finally, if that does not work then Jesus says, "Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

That verse has been used to clobber people. I know of groups that use that verse to justify shunning. But this is a very interesting turn of a phrase. It seems Jesus is saying, if someone hurts you and they ignore your attempts to be reconciled, including that which the community asks of them, then you can just write that persons off. Surely that is what Jesus means by treating them as "a Gentile and a tax collector." But is that what Jesus is saying? Would Jesus really tell us to just write someone off? In this particular passage we are talking about someone with whom we have a relationship. You and I know Jesus is all about relationship. If you recall the stories of his life and ministry you remember Jesus is always reaching out to people

on the margins. Among the Jewish community of his day, Gentiles were definitely on the margins.

If it was possible for someone to be even more marginalized it was the tax collector. The tax collector was hated because he was a traitor, he worked for the oppressive government of Rome and everyone knew tax collectors were thieves. Yet, Jesus goes to their homes. Jesus eats with Gentiles and tax collectors. Jesus even is known to have praised their faith.

So, after unsuccessfully bringing our grievances with someone who has hurt us to the community, we are to let such a one "be to us as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, instead of writing them off we are to try to move closer to them. Jesus reminds us all we need to do is love one another. It is that easy!

Not exactly, moving closer to someone who has hurt us is counter intuitive. What if that person hurts us again? What if the second hurt is more painful than the first? What if we are simply not ready to be close to that person? If that person has rebuffed our efforts for reconciliation why do we want to keep trying?

When Jesus invites us to love and to forgive, he does not give a timetable. Some of us are able to forgive hurt right away. Whether someone wants to be reconciled to us or not we are just able to forgive and move on. Many of us need time. We need to take things one step at a time. We know eventually we can achieve reconciliation but we need to move slowly. For some of us, reconciliation may not happen in this life time. Forgiveness for abuse or violence may not happen until the violator is dead.

This being said, Jesus reminds us that there is nothing we can do that cannot be done. We can with the help of friends, the support of our community, the love of God be reconciled with those who hurt us. God is indeed a dreamer. God intends for us to live in community with one another. We are created to rely on each other and care for one another. Yes, it is true, all we need is genuine love for one another.