

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 4 July 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

Last week Saint Paul reminded us that the whole of God's law is contained in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. This week the collect reminds us of that same command. To be a follower of Christ, to be a child of God means to love everyone. This is the core spiritual truth that we all strive to live.

According to the collect, we are to be 'united to one another with pure affection'. This pure affection (which means affection without self-interest) was a hallmark of the early Church, noted with great surprise even by their persecutors. They fed people because they were hungry, bandaged them because they were wounded, housed them because they had no shelter. They did not expect them to become members or give any sort of payment. They were striving to be children of the God who sends rain upon the just and the unjust, to give care because care is needed - as we say in our baptismal vows, to seek and serve Christ in all people.

We can be surprised at the neighbors who come across our path, the ones who need us. Today's lessons are filled with examples of people being cared for despite the divisions that would make such care improbable. Elisha healed the self-important general from Aram, Israel's powerful enemy. The disciples went out all undefended among a skeptical and hostile population, healing people possessed by demons that most of us would flee. Paul talks about healing relationships within the congregation, showing gentleness and compassion to those who have done wrong.

These are all people, whom, in the normal course of things, we would avoid. But what we see is acts of love, not tolerance, not pity, but love.

In the story from II Kings, we find ourselves in the camp of one of Israel's current enemies, the Arameans. The characters include the enemy king, his best general, who has doubtless been leading attacks on Israel, and a girl captured and enslaved during one of those raids. These are not the people we necessarily expect to play the roles they do. The girl, who has been torn from her family and homeland, with little hope of ever seeing either again, tells her mistress (presumably the general's wife) about Elisha, who could cure the leprosy that afflicts her master. She may have simply been bragging about the good things back home, not actually trying to help, but her words bore fruit.

I find it interesting that they negotiate king to king for healing, as they would for property or a treaty. The Aramean king sends valuable goods for trading and says, "I have a general needing healing; you have a healer - can we do a deal?" This negotiation could have proceeded according to usual protocol, except for the fact that what the Aramean wants is not a treaty arrangement, but healing from leprosy. The Israelite king is distraught, because he does not have the power to make such a deal and fears that war could result from his failure. Elisha, the prophet we saw receive his place as Elijah's

successor last week, tells his king, “Don’t worry; I can do it.” So Elisha, chosen to be chief prophet to God’s people, to the nation of Israel, offers to cure the enemy general who has successfully attacked Israel and her neighbors, and probably will again – not because he liked him, not because he deemed him worthy, but because he needed healing and because through this healing people would recognize that Israel has a special connection to God.

Then, when the sick general comes, Elisha does not lay hands on him, does not even come out of his house. He just sends a message telling the general to go and wash in the Jordan, the river in which John will later cleanse people of their sins. Naaman expects an elaborate ritual, but Elisha is creating a sign. The general is still operating within the expectations of the original king-to-king power negotiation and balks. But his servants help him to get past his ego and try the cure, which of course works. So Elisha has crossed that boundary of human enmity to bring God’s healing.

In the Gospel story, seventy of Jesus’ followers are sent out to bring peace and healing, to proclaim with these actions and with their words that the Kingdom of God has come among them. They are not to choose worthy people to heal or talk with. They are to cast this net broadly. It is up to the people in the towns to decide whether to accept them and what they bring. They are told not to provide for or protect themselves. Jesus has brought the Kingdom of God among them and his followers are to share this with any- and everyone. Some people will not receive what is offered, but that is not for the disciples to decide. They are to be universal in their offering. Of course, what they get most excited about is their success in casting out demons. It is wonderful that they do indeed go even to people like the terrifying man among the tombs two weeks ago, whose demon possession renders them dangerous and exiled from society.

But what seems to thrill them is not that the victims are healed but that they have power, power even over evil spirits.

You can hear Jesus sighing again, just like last week, “You people really still don’t understand, do you?” We are about love, not power. You have found your connection to God; now share it.

In the church in Galatia, just as in almost any church, people get involved with quarrels and disputes; rivalries develop, and people seem to enjoy correcting one another’s failings. Paul reminds them that the Spirit we have been given should enable us to bring people back into community with gentleness. Reach out in love, which binds up and heals, not with power which injures and subjugates. As he is advising this community about living together according to the basic commandment to love everyone, Paul tells them to ‘bear one another’s burdens’. This is the ultimate expression of that love Christ showed us. Christ accepted into himself all of the violence and rejection that human beings could muster, bore it unto death. He bore it clean away, and came back to a whole new kind of life because the love which bore the burden was stronger than any weight of sin and death.

That is how we are meant to live, bearing one another's burdens, lifting them up and away when we can, or shouldering half the yoke when we cannot take them away altogether.

I have often heard people say that you have to love everyone but you don't have to like them. That seems comforting, but I am not sure that it is true. Insofar as we are not seeing the beauty in another person, we are failing to see what God sees, to truly wish them well, to love them as we are called to do.

"Love one another, as I have loved you," Jesus said. Can you imagine Christ saying to you, "I love you, but I really do not like you very much"? Would that not feel like rejection, quite the opposite of love?

I think we are called to find our way, God being our helper, to both meet the needs of the neighbors we encounter and to also discover the loveableness in them, to bear their burdens and to rejoice in their being.

This means the terrible driver who cuts me off and swears at me. It means the person who pollutes the stream where I love to fish. It means the person who refuses to do his share of the work. It even means the person who threatens me with harm.

This is not an easy command, or even a natural command, but it is the one we are given that overrides all others. With it we find our way to the God who loves us no matter what, who loves every fiber of our being.

When we feel ourselves not up to the task, or trying to excuse ourselves from the command to love, it is helpful to remember real life examples. On Thursday we observed a feast day for Harriet Beecher Stowe (last week's Saint of the Week). When she was a young teacher in Cincinnati, she visited a student and her family up river in Washington KY. While there, she experienced a slave auction. I have stood on the courthouse lawn where she stood that day, and imagined what it must have been like. She saw, truly saw, individual human beings evaluated and sold as if they were bales of hay or draft horses. She did not allow her heart to close against them, but recognized the incredible pain and injustice.

She had not the power to loose their chains and set them free that day. But she truly loved those people and took them into her heart. She and her family were active in the Underground Railroad as long as they lived along the Ohio River, and her impassioned novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written after she had moved back to New England, was a catalyst for abolitionists in America and England and even Russia. The love enkindled in her heart that day was instrumental in bringing freedom to all the slaves in America, and even to Russian serfs.

This Thursday one of the members of the pastors' group told us how last week a couple in his congregation encountered a man who had been living for several years in Cook Park. They took him

into their home (which is near the park) and immediately contacted Pastor George about getting him a place in Jubilee House. They saw his need; they met it; they made him welcome. They are truly living out love for their neighbor.

As Paul says, “As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” Amen.