

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DENTON  
REV. JOHN BURTON  
MAY 28, 2011

SERMON: HATE IS NOT A FAMILY VALUE  
TEXT: LUKE 6:27-36

“But 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. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

It's 1880, the decade of gunslingers and gentlemen. This is a story of one such young man that wanted more than anything to be the fastest and most respected gunslinger in the west.

The place was Dodge City, Kansas in the Sawdust Saloon. The young man walked into the Sawdust Saloon and, to his surprise, saw Bat Masterson sitting at a table playing poker. The young man walked up to Bat and said, "Mr. Masterson, I would like to be a gunslinger just like you. Could you give me some tips?"

Bat Masterson put his cards down, looked up at the boy and said, "Son, I don't usually give out tips like this cause it could someday be detrimental to my health, but step back and let me take a look at you."

The boy stepped back and Mr. Masterson said, "You look good. You're wearing black, you've got two ivory handled guns with waxed holsters, and you look like a gunslinger. But what's more important, son, is: Can you shoot?"

The young man, happy to show how good he was, quickly drew his pistol from his right holster and without aiming shot the cuff link off of the piano player's right sleeve.

Bat Masterson said, "That's good shooting son, but can you shoot with your left hand?"

Before Masterson could even finish, the boy had already drawn the pistol from his left holster and shot the cuff link off of the piano player's left shirt sleeve. Very proud of himself the young man blew the smoke away from his six shooter and holstered his gun. "How was that?" the boy asked Masterson.

Bat Masterson smiled and looked up and the boy and said, "That was pretty good shooting son. I couldn't do better than that myself, but I do have one good tip for you."

"What's that?" the boy asked.

"I suggest that you run out the door like your pants were on fire."

Puzzled the young gunslinger asked Masterson why he should do that.

Masterson put his cards down again, leaned back in his chair, and said, "Well son, when Wyatt Earp, over there, gets done playing the piano, he's going to get up and . . ."

The boy didn't wait for the rest of the answer.

It is all too easy to learn about violence today. The same goes for persecution and oppression and tragedy. "Going Postal" is now a part of our language. We are less and less shocked by children committing murder because it happens more and more often. A handicapped girl is kidnapped and killed and her murderers brag about it. Tornadoes kill merely a handful of people and we hardly stop eating supper to watch the carnage de jour. And IED blows up a Hummer and only one soldier dies...and it barely rates the evening news.

Today it takes the extraordinary to break through our numbness to the overwhelming violence in our society!

From the days of Jesus, through the years of oppression and persecution, and throughout the great religious wars --- Christ has stood with victims; whether they were the victims of violence or hatreds or fear or even freckless biology. Indeed, as distinguished professor and preacher Dr. Fred Craddock has put it, "The teachings (of Jesus) assume that the listeners are victims, not victimizers. Jesus offered no instructions on what to do after striking, stealing, hating, cursing, and abusing others. Such behavior, it is assumed, is foreign to those who live under the reign of God."

It is assumed by Jesus' teachings that Christians are frequently victimized and that they struggle with how to respond to such treatment. One very pertinent question that the early church, during decades of persecution, had to address was: "How should you treat your oppressor, when you have been victimized, abused, rejected, used or oppressed?"

You and I both know what society tells us to do: "Bid your time and then get even." But is that a Christian response to oppression? I dare to suggest to you that God points to a harder, less immediately satisfying path, but one which will end in salvation and peace.

First, you are not to set your behavior from the one who victimized you:

You are not to become transformed into a pitiful whiner

You are not to play dead, as if your life was over

You are not to reciprocate and retaliate

And you are not to respond in kind and sink to his/her level;

Truly you may be savagely hurt and victimized -- but there is a big difference between being victimized and becoming a victim.

A person who is victimized picks up the pieces of his/her life and go on, while those who adopt a "victim mentality" focus their life on pain and hatred and possibly revenge. God does not want you to be stuck in such a cycle of grief and suffering. God wants to help you leave that oppression behind, that you may go on to a time of happiness, peace, and accomplishment.

Listen to the words of Elizabeth Smart, the young woman who was kidnapped and repeatedly raped for 9 months by her captor. At his sentencing she said, "I don't have very much to say to you. I know exactly what you did," Smart said. "I

know that you know that what you did was wrong. You did it with full knowledge ... I have a wonderful life now and no matter what you do, you will never affect me again."

That is the goal of all people who are victimized – to have a wonderful life in which the person(s) who hurt you will never affect you again, not even mentally.

Someone has said, "The ultimate curse of violence or abuse or oppression is hatred. Why? Because hatred pollutes one's soul and prepares it for Satan's inhabitation --- and often perhaps that can be our oppressor's worst legacy -- that by his or her action we lose our faith, embrace hatred and violence, and are alienated from God's love." God does not find hatred acceptable. God does not want our lives to be controlled by the hatred which evil can inspire.

I know that there are those among you who feel that you have reason to hate. And, if the truth were to come out, we might all see your hatred as understandable....but as one who has drunk from that cup of hatred and tasted well its poison, I can tell you that such hatred, even when we feel that it is just, separates us from God's sustaining love, destroys our chance for re-establishing peace, and in the end may harm us more than person or persons who oppressed us. Hatred is a door to our soul through which the Devil (Satan) can easily enter, and with him all manner of evil.

"Can a Christian embrace hate and still be OK with God?" No. Hate is a sin, even when a Christian feels it. And when we stoop to the abuser's level we need to seek God's healing. Allow God and the criminal justice system to work.

Our scripture raises the question of how are we to treat our oppressors? It says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt."

I know that may be difficult, at times it has been difficult for me. But God tells us to act like Christian, like ones whose salvation has been paid for by the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ, to act with love, forgiveness, and generosity -- not because they have earned it or deserve it -- but because Christians are called to live life on a higher plain and undeserved love is foundation upon which our entire faith is built.

But striving to love the individual (and I do know how much of an uphill battle that can be) does not mean giving up on justice being done!

God tells us we are to treat all people with love. All!

We are to teach all people:

as Children of God

as worthy of love even if they are unworthy of our respect or their own freedom.

as you would have them treat you.

Did you hear about the two Irishmen who were digging a ditch directly across from a brothel.

Suddenly, they saw a rabbi walk up to the front door, glance around and duck inside. "Ah, will you look at that?" One ditch digger said. "What's our world comin' to when men of th' cloth are visitin' such places?"

A short time later, a Protestant minister walked up to the door and quietly slipped inside. "Do you believe that?" The workman exclaimed. "Why, 'tis no wonder th' young people today are so confused, what with the example clergymen set for them."

After an hour went by, the men watched as a Catholic priest quickly entered the whore house. "Ah, what a pity," the digger said, leaning on his shovel. "One of th' poor lasses must be ill."

It is hard to put aside our long cherished preconceptions. Just as hard as it is to put aside long held anger or hatred.

Here in the church, which is built to reflect the values of Jesus, hate is not one of our family values. Here we learn to love all God's children - even the ones who abuse us.

That's not easy. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, a renowned preacher of nearly a century ago said, "The Christian ideal", it is said, "has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Following Christ takes courage and rejecting hate takes willpower. But it's worth it. Will you try it?