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Epiphany 7A
Peace, Seattle
February 23, 2014
Lev.19, 1 Cor, Matthew 5

LOVING BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS

How come Johnny can do such and such, but I can't?
How come Jill can go to the so and so, but I can't?
Why do I always have to do "X" when all my friends are doing "Y"?

There are a variety of ways parents could answer such questions—and do.
But when all is said and done, the bottom line is something like this:
That's the way we do it in this family.

It's about relationship. It's about having boundaries that both protect and define who we are.
Not that those boundaries won't be tested—they ought to be.
Not that those lines won't move as children grow and mature—they need to.
And not that there aren't occasions when rules flex so that fledglings can try their wings.

But there remains in healthy families a core sense of self that is built on the solid ground of a shared identity.

What we have in our first lesson today is God, in the role of Parent, laying out in bold, clean lines expectations for how his children are to behave when it comes to dealings with the neighbor. And did you notice both how practical and how benevolent it all is?
- Harvesting techniques for grain and grape are not about bringing in the biggest yield but rather looking out for the welfare of the poor and alien, who, by God's design, depend on your generosity.
- Anything that could potentially harm the neighbor—stealing, dealing falsely, lying, defrauding—is off the table.
- Taking vengeance, even bearing a grudge—run counter to God's family values.

It all boils down to this: I have loved and cared for you, says the LORD, I redeemed you from captivity, I cared for you when you couldn't care for yourselves, I called you into a covenant relationship; you and I are forever linked together, O my people, and therefore I expect you to treat others the way I have treated you.

Other peoples, other nations, may operate differently—and do—but this is how I am calling you to be and act. This is who we are together. These are the markers by which we carry ourselves in the world.

St. Paul says much the same when, in addressing the cliquish community in Corinth, he tells them:
- LOOK! Don't over-identify with one leader—whether Apollos or Cephas or Paul—and find yourselves at odds with one another, because it's really not about them.
- They are at the service of one foundation, and one Lord, who is Jesus Christ. And it's to him—not to any of them—that you owe your allegiance, to him that you ultimately belong.

And then we come to the gospel, where Jesus ups the ante yet again.
YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID, LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AND HATE YOUR ENEMY,
BUT I SAY TO YOU, LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU.

And the clincher:
BE PERFECT, THEREFORE, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS PERFECT.

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Even if the Greek word translated in verse 48 "be perfect" can also be translated "be mature," we still have a problem on our hands, or at least I do. 'Cause when I'm honest with myself, it's enough of a challenge for me to love my own family—let alone my neighbor—and I just don't see how on earth I'm going to be able to love my enemy.

But Jesus didn't ask me my opinion; and he doesn't let me off the hook.
Instead, drilling down to the core he says:[1]

> IF ALL YOU DO IS LOVE THE LOVABLE, DO YOU EXPECT A BONUS?
> ANYBODY CAN DO THAT.
> IF YOU SIMPLY SAY HELLO TO THOSE WHO GREET YOU, DO YOU EXPECT A MEDAL?
> ANY RUN OF THE MILL SINNER DOES THAT.
> IN A WORD, WHAT I'M SAYING IS: GROW UP.
> YOU'RE KINGDOM SUBJECTS. NOW LIVE LIKE IT. LIVE OUT YOUR GOD-CREATED IDENTITY. LIVE GENEROUSLY AND GRACIOUSLY TOWARD OTHERS, THE WAY GOD LIVES TOWARD YOU.

In other words, that's the way we do it in this family.

Missing the mark doesn't mean we get a free pass—as if we could leave this family to which we've been born and reborn through the waters of baptism—NO, Christ meets us here at this Table, and here (in heart) and here (head) and here (community) with his invitation and support to keep moving, keep on growing up and out toward the heart and soul of love. Not because if we manage, by the grace of God, to love more generously we somehow become more precious to him, but because our neighbor needs us.

In recent decades, the church has been awakening to a broader definition of "neighbor" than what has prevailed for the past two millennia, and a sense of ethical responsibility that extends beyond the human species to include the rest of God's creatures and the Earth itself.

Over the next four months our Kindem family's sabbatical itinerary will take us to places that bear the imprint of the church's presence over the past two thousand years, ancient cathedrals and hallowed islands; great monuments to human achievement and remote stone circles that pre-date Christianity by thousands of years.

We'll be visiting communities, both ancient and contemporary, that are seeking to live with the recognition that Nature is not—as the majority opinion in the West has long held—an enemy to be conquered but rather a system of relationships complex and interwoven, of whom we are part, and on whom we depend for our own health, safety and wholeness, and with whom we are in kinship in both a practical and spiritual sense.

This sabbatical is, by design, about rest and renewal, about finding a way to live a more balanced life, and it's also about opening ourselves to experiences, and places, and people, that can help us get there.

We've set our sights on a number of particular places, but with flexibility, for we know that, along the way, the Spirit is bound to surprise us and move us in directions we hadn't even thought of. And we expect to learn things along the way that will reshape us in ways we can scarcely imagine.

[1] Eugene Peterson, *The Message. The New Testament in Contemporary Language.* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) p. 21-22

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Being given this gift of time to step outside the regular rhythms and obligations of our lives in order to be with each other, to strengthen our sense of family and to also be with others in exploration and learning—**there really are no words adequate to express how deeply and gratefully we hold this gift of an extended Sabbath that has been placed in our hands**.

We thank God, we thank Christian Theological Seminary and the Lilly Foundation, we thank you.

We don't have room in our suitcases for all of you, but there is a way you can tag along, and that's through a website we've designed that will go live by next Sunday.[2]

At this site, you'll be able to see where we are from week to week and what we're up to, and to view photos and read posts from the road.

If you don't own a computer or don't have the foggiest idea how to look up a website, have no fear, new posts will be printed each week and put up out in the narthex.

And while we're doing our thing, you'll have your own sabbatical agenda to pursue—less geographical, but no less spiritual. We hope you will take full advantage of those opportunities; we look forward to comparing notes after our return.

Every family develops its own way of being in the world, & the same is true of every congregation. Loving the neighbor, welcoming the stranger, and caring for each other are some of the hallmarks of this community we call Peace.

Christ stands with us as we live out this identity; and Christ stands outside and beyond us, too, across the street, over the fence, beyond the tracks, ever calling us to use love to turn enemies into friends.

Amen.

Let us pray:
Lord Jesus, in the waters of baptism you claimed us as beloved children, making us part of the family of God; and you called us to a way of being in the world that is grounded in love rather than fear. Infuse us with such grace that, through the power of your Spirit, our love will continue grow and mature, becoming a bridge to others, so that all who experience this community will say: the heart of Christ is alive and well among them! Amen.

[2] Many thousand thanks to Erik Steen for his expertise and labor in helping design this site and get it up and running: www.sabbatical.peacelutheranseattle.org.