

“The Vocabulary of Faith: Hate”

Leviticus 19:13-18

Matthew 5:38-49

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Where do I begin to talk about hate? Maybe I should begin with the mosque massacre in New Zealand, or perhaps the Tree of Life Synagogue horror in Pittsburgh. Or perhaps I ought to talk about the Muslim woman in Ann Arbor who was threatened with being set ablaze if she did not remove her hijab, or the Muslim woman in Minnesota who was beaten when she would not remove hers. I could start with the mother of a two-year-old who died from the flu and the hundreds of hate filled entries on her Facebook account from antivaxxers, or perhaps the parents of the children who died in school shootings and the continuing hate filled assault on them claiming that it was all a lie and they never had children to begin with. But then there was Matthew Shepherd killed for being gay. Or, I could list all the times black Americans have been the target of hate filled rage for entering their own apartments, speaking on the phone in hotel where they were registered guests, cleaning up their own front yards or swimming in a neighborhood pool, where they were members. Oh, and one last one, the 4.2 million anti-Semitic tweets in 2018.

Hate, it is all around us. But it is not new. Long before this moment there was hate in Selma, Boston, Tulsa and Detroit. There was the Klan, slavery and segregation. There were the Texas Rangers who were above the law when it came to killing people of Mexican descent. There was Wounded Knee and the hatred of early colonists toward native peoples. But to fully understand hate, I think we need to stop and consider what we mean by the word. Biblically it means feelings of animosity toward another, or hostile words or deeds directed toward the innocent. What this means is that hate is a spectrum disorder. It begins on one end of the feelings spectrum that lead to jokes which demean persons because of their race, gender or language. It moves from there to hate speech, then to discrimination, then to threats of violence, then to actual acts of violence and then to genocide, again against others who are considered to unworthy of acceptance. It is a spectrum disorder, but it is also a disease that destroys both the hated and the hater. It is an act of mutually assured destruction. Hate leaves no one unscathed.

This is the kind of hate that Jesus witnessed around him in Galilee. The Romans hated the Galileans because they were always struggling for political independence. The Galileans hated the Romans because they were an oppressive, occupying power. The Galileans hated the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem because they considered those authorities to be corrupt and illegitimate. The authorities in Jerusalem hated the Galileans because they didn't consider them real Jews. Then the Pharisees hated the Sadducees, and they all hated the Samaritans and the tax collectors. Hate was consuming Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem. And not long after Jesus' death it would destroy the nation. And so it was in that air, thick with hatred that Jesus spoke words which would have shocked his audience. Rather than hating, they were to love. I believe that Jesus spoke these words because he believed that hatred was destroying Israel's ability to live out its vocation as the one's who were to bless all the nations. Only loving the world like

God loved the world would make blessing the world possible. Only loving the world would lead to its transformation into the renewed creation. Hate would merely destroy.

Jesus then, in this passage addresses both those who are hated and those who hate. And he tells them that their escape will be through rehumanizing the other. First, he addresses how those being hated are to respond to the hate; and that is by creatively rehumanizing themselves in the eyes of the haters. Jesus does this in his three commands to turn the other cheek, to give up all of one's clothes and to go the extra mile. These are not humility building exercises. They are rehumanizing exercises. In each of these actions, the one hating is forced to acknowledge the full humanity of the other because the actions, striking a second time, taking all of someone's clothes and of allowing the person to go the extra mile were socially unacceptable. Thus, they are acts of defiance against the hate, which force the hater to acknowledge the humanity of the hated as someone deserving to be treated according to the law. Second, Jesus addresses those of his followers who hate. Rather than hate they are to rehumanize the ones they hate. They are to do so by praying and not hating. By loving and not taking revenge. I don't know if you have ever tried this or not, but it is very hard to hate someone you are lifting to God. Through prayer, one is forced to see the other as a child of God, even if they are not the most likeable people. Jesus' followers were to love and not hate, hoping that their enemies would become their friends.

We have been given a mission from God and that is to bless the world. We cannot do this if hate is part of our lives either as individuals or as a community. My challenge for all of us then, and especially in the intense atmosphere in which we are currently living, is to love and not hate and to pray for those with whom we are at odds, that God might use them to bless the world as well. So here is the question I would like you to ask for this week, how am I praying for those with whom I disagree and not merely for those whom I like?