

Clackamas United Church of Christ
Rev. Adam Ericksen
10.13.19

Practicing What You Preach in an Age of Hostility

Well, friends, I just need to tell you that I'm having a hard time.

Because we are a justice-seeking people. Part of our mission is to be a Just Peace church. And as Martin Luther King Jr. [said](#), "there can be no peace without justice."

And like King, I am convinced that the only way to true justice is not through violence, but through nonviolent acts that are guided by the spirit of love.

But here's the thing that King discovered - that kind of love is offensive to many people.

The prophets of the Bible, Jesus, Saint Francis, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Dorothy Day all discovered that love can be surprisingly offensive.

So I want to be upfront and tell you that as a church that is dedicated to our mission of working for a more just and peaceful world through nonviolent action, we're going to offend some people. We can expect that to happen.

And here's where I'm having a hard time practicing what I preach: We proclaim that God loves everyone just as they are, but I'm having a hard time loving people who disagree with me. And, I hate to admit this, but it's especially the case when it comes to loving family members who disagree. Anyone else have this problem?

I'll give you an example. We are pretty outspoken in our commitment to justice through our work at food pantries, helping the Clackamas service center, the Clackamas women's center, and LGBTQ groups. We are also outspoken in this commitment online through our signs and justice programs.

Well, 90% of people responding in our community and on social media have been positive. But 10% have been negative. And one of that 10% happens to be a cousin of mine. He's relentless in his criticisms against me.

I say that God loves all people, including our LGBTQ siblings. He says I'm pandering to minorities, making up my own religion, and that I'm the pastor of a cult. (You are welcome.)

I say that black lives matter because for too long in the United States they haven't. He calls me a racist because apparently I hate white people.

I want stricter gun legislation, like better background checks. He says I'm attacking the second amendment, which apparently makes me a traitor to my country.

And I know that he has attacked some of you online because I've seen it. Unfortunately, it got to the point where I had to block him from our social media.

Well, last weekend I went to my uncle's funeral. It was a wonderful and inspiring funeral that celebrated a life that was lived well.

But my cousin was there.

During the reception, I talked with a few people there about whether I should talk to him. My aunt, whom I adore, came up to me and said that he wanted to talk with me. Inside I thought, "No way am I talking to that guy!" As I continued to talk with the people around me about what I should do, my brother looked me in the eyes and said, "You need to practice what you preach."

I must admit to you that my brother is a better Christian than I am.

I got over the pit in my stomach. But as I went to talk with him, he was getting ready to leave. We smiled as we shook hands and hugged. We asked each other, "How are you doing?" And then we were on our way.

I tell you this part of the Ericksen family dirty laundry of religion and politics because I think maybe some of you can identify with it.

The thing that stung the most was not talking with this cousin or giving him a hug. That was nice and now I wish we had more time to talk. The thing that stung the most was my brother saying, "You need to practice what you preach." It stung because he was telling the truth about me. I wasn't practicing what I preach. I was afraid. I lacked courage. And so I avoided practicing what I preach.

How do you practice love and justice in a world that seems so hostile?

You don't let that hostility define you. As we work for a more just world, we boldly love people, including, as Jesus teaches, those who might angrily disagree with us, those who try to shame us, those we might call our enemies. That is one of the most important religious and spiritual teachings that has been handed down to us from our tradition.

For example, there once lived a man named Jeremiah. He lived during one of the most traumatic events of Jewish history. His nation was utterly destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians killed Jewish men, women, and children. They destroyed the temple, the king's palace, and other important buildings in Jerusalem. They sent many of the survivors into exile

throughout their Empire. It was a humiliating defeat that led many ancient Jews to question the goodness and even the existence of their God.

Now, if I were the prophet Jeremiah, I would probably respond to the Babylonian hostility with hostility of my own. I'd say, "We all know those Babylonians are a bunch of violent jerks! They have no compassion for anyone. Their king is a tyrant and in the end our God is going to get revenge! Just wait it out and soon we will be strong enough again to get justice!"

But that's not how Jeremiah responded to this tragedy. Instead of revenge, Jeremiah said to those forced into the Babylonian Exile these words:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Many Christians claim that the Old Testament is a horrible book because it's all about God's violence against our enemies. But Jeremiah gives us a radically different picture. He knew that all human life is interconnected. Indeed, our fate is tied up with everyone else's fate, including the fate of our enemies. And so instead of telling his people to pray for revenge against the Babylonians, he tells them to "pray to the Lord on [their] behalf, for in [their] welfare you will find your welfare."

And then there's Jesus. In our passage today, Jesus heals 10 men who had leprosy, one happened to be a Samaritan. Jesus sent the men on their way to a priest to get healed, but on their way to the priest, they were healed.

The one Samaritan was so overcome with gratitude that he came back to Jesus thanking him and praising God for this healing.

In order to understand this story, we need to know something about [Samaritans](#). They were from the country to the north and were seen as foreigners. But to make matters worse, they were seen as people who didn't worship the right god. They were seen as "other" and they were largely feared because they were seen as foreigners and enemies.

Much of the culture during Jesus' day trained people to be hostile toward the Samaritans. But we need to be careful here; it wasn't because the culture was Jewish that it trained people to be hostile toward the Samaritans. It was because it was human.

You may have noticed that our culture also trains us to be hostile toward the "other." And this is what makes it difficult to practice what I preach.

But Jesus healed this Samaritan. God's healing power is for everyone - including Babylonians and Samaritans, including those we call our enemies.

So, I'll end with this. Who are the Babylonians in your life? Who are those who act with hostility against you? Maybe you need to hear the words of Jeremiah this morning, who tells us to keep living our lives. To not respond to hostility with hostility, but to realize that our welfare is tied up with their welfare.

Or, who is the Samaritan in your life? Who is the one that our culture has trained us to hate? Is it immigrants from Central or South America? Is it Republicans or Democrats? Is it the rich or the poor? Is it people of a different sexual or gender orientation? Is it a family member who vehemently disagrees with you about religions and politics?

I don't know about you, but I'm infected by the spirit of hostility within our culture. That spirit is everywhere. It is so infectious, that if I'm not careful, I can start to see almost every interaction as a potentially hostile one. If I come to that point, I'll always be on guard. And so instead of listening to the seemingly constant flow of hostility running through our politics and media, I need to listen to the words of Jeremiah and the words of Jesus and the words of my brother and the words of people like you so that I can be held accountable to practice what I preach.

And so as we work for a more just and inclusive world,

May we continue to act with nonviolent love.

May we heal whatever hostility within our hearts.

And may we seek the welfare of the other, for in their welfare we will find our welfare. Amen.