

Even Those People?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

Matthew 5:43-48 (“The Message” translation by Eugene Peterson)

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. 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.

from *Across that Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, by John Lewis

You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light. Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover the universal truth, and follow its dictates. [...] Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won. Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself.

Sermon

If you read even a cursory biography of the legendary Civil Rights leader and longtime leader in Congress, John Lewis, you will quickly lose count of the number of times he was severely beaten during the Civil Rights movement, including on the “Bloody Sunday” march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge when Lewis’s skull was fractured by police batons.

In short, Lewis had plenty of reason not to love his “enemies.”

But we heard his words earlier, words which echoed that injunction from the Gospel of Matthew to love your enemies: “Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart.”

How could John Lewis write those words, hold those sentiments, after all he’d been through at the hands of fellow citizens?

Goodness, don’t we sometimes even find it a challenge to “hold only love” to those driving unsafely on the highway? And in case we harbored the illusion that we didn’t think of

anyone as an “enemy,” George Carlin, in one of his stand-up routines decades ago, asked this: “Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?”

That “idiot” making us late for whatever. And that “maniac” endangering our lives. Both “enemies” for the moment.

Yet... if we paused and made the slightest effort to love them, we might wonder, lovingly, whether the slow driver is maybe a new young driver on the highway for the first time, just trying their best to be safe; and the fast driver maybe just got fired from their job or is in the midst of grief and not paying their usual attention.

(And... might give us a little perspective to realize that sometimes we are someone else’s “idiot” or “maniac.”)

None of which means that they (or sometimes we) shouldn’t be stopped for speeding and given a warning and reminder to slow down... or speed up. Accountability, you see, is not incompatible with understanding and love.

And there are of course plenty of situations, from the political to the personal, in which accountability is essential. But does this mean we can’t at the same time love? Even love the January 6th insurrectionists? Even love Vladimir Putin? Even love the person who has done you real personal harm?

Well, that’s the challenge, isn’t it, posed by Jesus, posed by John Lewis – both of whom had plenty of reason to hate.

Why bother? Maybe it comes down at least in part to something practical that Martin Luther King once famously said, which is that “hate can never drive out hate, only love can do that.”

In this regard, a few years ago I shared with you the story of a fellow named Arno Michaelis. The story was told in an article titled “From Hate to Love: An ex-neo-Nazi’s journey to Buddhism” (by Lindsay Kyte in the May 2018 issues of “Lion’s Roar”).

Michaelis was raised in the 1970s in what looked on the outside to be an idyllic suburban setting – but inside his house was an alcoholic father and a mother made miserable by the father’s drinking.

All this led young Arno on a path to a certain sort of addiction – to the adrenaline rush that came from bullying and hurting others. This led in turn to his becoming consumed with interest in and eventual leadership in the white supremacy movement. “He fancied himself someone who was saving the white race from oppression,” the article said. As Michaelis himself later put it, “It was about fighting for your people and National Socialism. Anybody who didn’t like it was an enemy. It was all very romantic and it really repulsed civil society, which also gave me a kick...; (and) as we radiated hate and violence into the world, the world handed it back to us.”

He and others in the movement got into gang fights, particularly in his home city of Milwaukee, like too many of our cities racially divided. “I practiced violence until it was natural,” he said, “and the violence became who I was.”

He was hooked on the adrenaline rush of it all.

As time went on though, in the words of this article, "...amid the chaos and bloodshed, something within Michaelis was glimpsing something that didn't fit his violent narrative – the kindness and compassion of people he considered enemies."

There were many such examples. Here's one, having to do with a woman described as an elderly Black cashier at a McDonald's. "Spotting the swastika tattoo on Michaelis' middle finger, she looked at him and said, 'I know you're a better person than that. That's not who you are.'"

Other instances had to do with his being treated with kindness from his "Jewish boss, lesbian supervisor, or Black and Latino coworkers."

Significantly, the article reports that even his parents, themselves living a difficult journey, never gave up on him.

Then Michaelis had a child, itself transformative; a few short years later, seeing his daughter playing with children of other races at daycare, as he now puts it, "It struck me that they were all children – not Black children or white children, but the sons and daughter of mothers and fathers."

Finally, Michaelis could no longer bear the thought of all the hurt he had caused others, and could not bear the thought of his own daughter being exposed to the sort of violence he had inflicted on others.

He began to explore Buddhism, becoming gradually deeply committed to regular Buddhist practice. He says "he now defines hate as 'the willful denial of compassion.'"

Notice that language.

Implicit in this affirmation is that compassion is natural, and that it is the *denial* of compassion that is unnatural, even inhuman. This means that whether through Buddhist meditation or Christian prayer or simply a humanist commitment, compassion and by extension love don't need to be learned. Rather, the task is to unlearn the cultural or personal conditioning of hate and separation, thereby revealing natural compassion, natural love, the experience of the interconnection of all beings that *is* who we are... not who we have to learn to be. This in the spirit of our first Unitarian Universalist "Principle" affirming the "inherent worth and dignity of every person."

How do we unlearn hate? For Arno Michaelis, the beginning of his unlearning hate hinged, as we heard, on others treating him with compassion, kindness, and love. Love driving out hate, as Dr. King put it. Like that elderly Black cashier – a natural target of Michaelis's hate at the time – who saw past the tattoo more deeply into Michaelis's essential nature, then saying "I know you're a better person than that. That's not who you are."

How could she know that? Maybe she saw something in his eyes that he could not see. Or maybe because she knows that every human being, at heart, is a better person than such a tattoo, that every human being is made of and for love, no matter how concealed and covered over by cultural conditioning or abusive personal experiences.

Look, as I said earlier, none of this means that we don't hold people to account for their hurtful (or worse) actions. But it does mean that maybe we can learn at least some of the time, as best we can, to see through their outward appearance and behavior, to see with the soft eyes of compassion the love that is within every soul, however buried or obscured. Is it at least worth the effort?

Contemplate the power of this for a moment.

Think of the power of the love of this old Black woman in McDonald's standing before this tough-looking white guy with a swastika tattooed to his middle finger.

Or think again of John Lewis, taking the blows of hate from the police and the Klan and still holding to love – the power of that. Holding to love with extraordinary patience (remember Paul in his letter to the Corinthians affirmed that love is patient)... with patience that the power of love *would*, soon or late, overcome hate. And you know what? In February 2009, forty-eight years after one of the brutal attacks on Lewis and others, Lewis received a nationally televised apology from Elwin Wilson, a white southerner and former Klansman.

Anyway... here's a sort of practical, what might seem to be even a little selfish, question for us in regard to all this: Which is better for both our blood pressure and our spiritual health: To live with hate in our hearts or with love in our hearts? Harboring hate and habitual anger is exhausting, physically and spiritually, isn't it? And as for me, I'd rather not waste energy hating or being angry – life is too short. Whereas tapping the inward reservoir – an ocean really – of compassion and love is physically and spiritually renewing and sustaining.

With this in mind, what a relief it seemed to be for Arno Michaelis to no longer be carrying around the armor of hate, seeing so many as enemy; what a relief it must have been for that Klansman to apologize to John Lewis, collapsing the barrier that hate had erected.

Is it easy to learn to love those with whom we disagree or may even think of as an enemy? No. And maybe sometimes not even possible, some might understandably say not worth the effort, particularly if someone has caused them serious harm.

But like anything else, we can practice, and with practice get better at it.

Practice by saying a prayer for the well-being of those with whom we disagree, disagree perhaps quite vehemently on significant matters.

Practice with the Buddhist mantra of compassion, wishing for peace, well-being, and happiness for our dear ones and friends first, naturally so (that's the "warm-up" you might say), then eventually even for those people we see behaving badly, maybe really badly.

Or practice by looking deeply into the lives of others, seeking to understand how they have come to be the sort of person they are or how they have come to hold the opinions they hold or why they might have done this or that.

Finally, for this morning, remembering that accountability and love are not incompatible and that loving your enemy does not mean you don't speak up in the face of injustice or oppression, I invite us to remember the words at the end of the passage from John Lewis that we heard earlier – words with which I will conclude:

Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.