

Palisades Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2006

Reflection:

"Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all. It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system."

- From *Loving Your Enemies* Sermon, Delivered 17 November 1957
by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Readings: 1 Thessalonian 3:9-13

The Gospel According to Luke: Luke 21:25-36

Hymns: #335 Though I May Speak

#8 Lift Up Your Heads

#295 O God of Love, O God of Peace

Abounding Love
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I know some of you have been secretly slipping into my office and checking out The Interpreter's Bible that sits on the shelves against the wall. I can tell, especially during some of our talk backs and the comments I hear. I invite more of you to slip and take a look, asking only that the texts not leave the office. They are an excellent background source for any Bible studies.

If you were to look at the Interpreter's Bible for this morning's reading of Luke, you would notice a few things. First, Chapter 21 has a lot to do with the coming end. There are a whole series of sections on the eschatological sensibility of the times, including:

21: 5-6	Prediction that the Temple would be destroyed
21: 7-19	Preliminary signs of the approaching end
21:20-24	Fate of Jerusalem
21:25-28	Coming of the Son of Man
21:29-31	Parable of the Fig Leaf Tree
21:32-33	Prediction and a Certification (The Apocalypse is going to take place, promise!)
21:34-36	Injunction to watchfulness and prayer
21:37-38	Summary of Jesus' Life and Work in Jerusalem: "And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all people came to him in the temple to hear him."

Second, you would also notice that every one of these sections, except for the last two sections: The *injunction to watchfulness and prayer* and the *summary of Jesus' life* -- have a parallel version in Mark. In other words, Mark was much of Luke's source, for this text written in the popular Greek of the day (Koine). Mark was a source, a reference, but Luke made his own changes to reflect his interpretations and sense of the times. As the Interpreter's Bible says, "Some of the distinctive features of Luke's style can be noted in connection with the omissions, changes, and improvements in the material he took over from Mark."

Luke, with the rest of the early church, was starting to recognize that the apocalypse might not be as close as they had thought, and that "generation" – as in the coming end of this generation - might mean things as broad and expansive as "fate of the human race" or other extended understandings. There was clearly a transition beginning to stir, a shift from "it's only a matter of days" to "maybe we better figure out how to practice these teachings of Jesus for the longer haul, not worrying so much about when the end is going to come, but about being faithful, day by day."

That was and continues to be the real work of being faithful, and such was the work of the evangelists – helping others to learn and remain faithful against all odds, day by day.

On to our second reading, Paul's writing to the Thessalonians. Thessalonica of the times was the major harbor of Macedonia, located on the Via Egnatia, or "Overland Military Highway," from the city of Rome to the countries at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The city was dominated by two major fertility cults of Dionysus and Orpheus. It was a raucous metropolitan center at the crossroads of trade and power. When Paul and Timothy and Sylvanus went there from Philippi to establish a church, they met with a great deal of resistance – but the church did take root, where it most often did - among the weakest and marginalized of the population.

For the most part without power or resources, the first members of the church of Thessalonica found great meaning and hope in the message of Paul and company. This morning we are reading a letter from Paul to the Thessalonians, that was written by him following a report by Timothy who had just returned from a mission there. Paul is exhorting and thanking the Thessalonians for their faithfulness in living the gospel, recognizing that they were having some difficulty with loving their neighbors, especially considering the oppression and persecution they faced on a regular basis.

The section we read this morning is actually called the Apostle's Prayer, and if you read it with this in mind you can see how Paul is praying for them:

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

“Abound,” here, meaning – overflowing. May love overflow from you to others, for it is our love that abounds, overflows, for you.

And the source of all abounding love is God, as shown in the evangelist's message and teaching that Jesus, out of this love, had died for them, so their sins could be forgiven, and so that they could have hope and faith in the promise of eternal life.

The challenge of being faithful today with an overflowing love is surely as difficult as it was during these early formative years of Christianity. Trying to understand the message of the evangelists, being willing to try and live a different way, loving their neighbors and oppressors – was a huge order then, as it is now.

Think of how easy it is to get entrenched behind a simple resentment of one sort of another. Then take a look at this command of Jesus' to love one another; to forgive your enemies, even.

In the quote on the front of today's bulletin, I captured some of this struggle in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s efforts to use the love of God and the teachings of Jesus in leading many in the Civil Rights movement. See how eloquently he maintains love for the individual:

“When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system.”

In all our mission and ministry, it is the abounding love of God that overflows into our lives that put us into motion. As it travels and gathers in this safe harbor of our church and others like it, it stirs the imagination, the Spirit in all of us, that moves us over the obstacles between us into a force for loving others, even

forgiving enemies (by whatever definition we use) as we seek to grow in faith and be of service. Make no mistake about it, there is abounding love here!

You may remember a talk of mine a few weeks ago; I highlighted some of the many, many ways we practice these principles in our work here at the Palisades Presbyterian Church. Afterwards, in a friendly way, someone said, "Sure, you tell us how great we are, build us up, and then ask us for money!" We had a good laugh – and yes we need money to do the work, but that's not where I am headed today. Besides, I have faith that you all will take care of that part.

The part that I want to close on today is simply that this is really, truly – honestly – a place that is fed, fueled, energized, moved, and enlightened by love, whether we think of it as such or not. It's almost easier sometimes for me to say something like, "Well, I am involved in this because it is a social justice issue and ..." instead of: "I do this because I love others as I have been loved and this is what I believe God calls me and others to do."

We all know the love is there, but we sort of tuck it away and find other motives a step or two away from being so revelatory to describe our incentive for being faithful.

So, in these weeks ahead, as we move into Advent - in the light of the candle of Hope - let's keep in mind that the promise we hope for cannot be fully realized if anything is blocking our love for one another. And whatever it is that blocks love or forgiveness – is truly a burden for those of us who harbor such things. This love business is not an easy thing, but it is the foundation of our existence, for God is this Love we strive to embody. Got Love? Got God.

Let me close with the words of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from *Loving Your Enemies*¹ from almost 50 years ago:

And oh this morning, as I think of the fact that our world is in transition now. Our whole world is facing a revolution. Our nation is facing a revolution, our nation. One of the things that concerns me most is that in the midst of the revolution of the world and the midst of the revolution of this nation, that we will discover the meaning of Jesus' words.

So this morning, as I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama and all over America and over the world, I say to you, "I love you. I would rather die than hate you." And I'm foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom. We will be able to matriculate into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love our enemies, to bless those persons

¹ http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/571117.002_Loving_Your_Enemies.html

that cursed us, to even decide to be good to those persons who hated us, and we even prayed for those persons who spitefully used us.

Oh God, help us in our lives and in all of our attitudes, to work out this controlling force of love, this controlling power that can solve every problem that we confront in all areas.

Amen.