

Sermon delivered at the Wildflower Church, Austin on March 11, 2007 by Eric Hepburn.

Reading:

Namaste.

When I was introduced to this greeting many years ago I was told that it meant, “I see the light in you that is also in me.” I’ve been struck by the beauty of that concept ever since.

The normal gesture that accompanies this greeting, is to close the eyes, bow the head, and fold the hands over the heart chakra, which is the location of light, of the divine spark, of the soul, in Buddhism.

There is a long theological tradition of representing goodness with light, and so, in that sense, namaste is about seeing and acknowledging the good in others and in yourself every time you meet someone. It is really a mini-meditation on goodness masquerading as a greeting.

Another definition of namaste is: I recognize that within each of us is a place where Divinity dwells, and when we are in that place, we are One. It is our hope, that in this church, through this fellowship here today, each of us will reside in that place where we recognize that we are all one...

Namaste...

Sermon: Demons of the Heart

The sermon that I’ve come to share with you today is based heavily upon the works of three people who I consider modern-day prophets: Martin Luther King Jr., Tenzin Gyatso the 14th Dalai Lama, and Mohandas K. Gandhi. When we think about religion there is a tendency to focus our attention upon the great religious prophets of the distant past, prophets whose context was so radically different from our own that it seems difficult, sometimes even ludicrous, to apply their teachings to our modern lives. So I want to focus on these modern day prophets, who applied the highest teachings to the problems and the situations that they faced right here in the modern world. Hopefully, their example will serve to remind us that the highest ideals of life are not made for pedestals but to govern the hearts and deeds of each one of us...

First I would like to share with you some passages from a Martin Luther King Jr. sermon entitled “loving your enemies”.

“(The agape form of love is) understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it’s what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them..

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.

And this is what Jesus means... when he says, "Love your enemy." And it's significant that he does not say, "Like your enemy." Like is a sentimental something, an affectionate something. There are a lot of people that I find it difficult to like. I don't like what they do to me. I don't like what they say about me and other people. I don't like their attitudes. I don't like some of the things they're doing. I don't like them. But Jesus says love them. And love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men, so that you love everybody, because God loves them. You refuse to do anything that will defeat an individual, because you have agape in your soul. And here you come to the point that you love the individual who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. This is what Jesus means when he says, "Love your enemy." This is the way to do it. When the opportunity presents itself when you can defeat your enemy, you must not do it.

I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus' thinking, is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil... Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love.

There's another reason why you should love your enemies, and that is because hate distorts the personality of the hater. We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated or the individuals hated or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates. You just begin hating somebody, and you will begin to do irrational things. You can't see straight when you hate. You can't walk straight when you hate. You can't stand upright. Your vision is distorted... For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That's what hate does.

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. That's why Jesus says, "Love your enemies." Because if you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they're mistreating you. Here's the person who is a neighbor, and this person is doing something wrong to you and all of that. Just keep being friendly to that person. Keep loving them. Don't do anything to embarrass them. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with bitterness because they're mad

because you love them like that. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies."

I'd like to translate some of this traditional Christian language into some terms and ideas that are a little more accessible to those of us who, while having a great respect for the religion of Jesus, do not subscribe to the religion about Jesus.

First, Dr. King relies heavily upon the idea that we love our enemies because God or Jesus loves them. At the core of these assertions, I believe, is not any sort of construct about God being a personality or a father figure or Jesus his sole manifestation in the flesh, but the more fundamental truth of human unity. The more fundamental idea that we members of this human species are brothers and sisters, children of the same universe. The more fundamental idea that our similarities are greater than our differences and that we ultimately struggle for the same things: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Second, I think the idea of agape needs clarification, because every time that the word love is used in this sermon, he means agape. He's not talking about eros, about erotic love, about the love of beauty, or about the love of attraction. He's also not talking about philia, about the love of companionship, the love of friendship, or the love of kinship. He is talking about agape, about understanding, redemptive goodwill. He is talking about having a basic feeling, a basic attitude toward all people that acknowledges their basic worth as human beings, that understands that they struggle to be good, just as we do, and that hopes, one day, that they will overcome their inner demons and come to live out the better angels of their nature, just as we have those hopes for ourselves.

Next, I'd like to talk about the attitudes that we take when we are in opposition to others, because what we believe, what we intend in the world has a great impact on how we act, how we are perceived by others, and ultimately, in a karmic sense, on the real outcomes of our action. When we act in opposition to another person or group of people, we have the power to choose this attitude. We could choose to treat them as an enemy, to dehumanize them, to devalue them, to disrespect and marginalize them, then we are trying to defeat them, to destroy or maim or cripple them. This is what Dr. King is arguing against. On the other hand, if our opposition is accompanied by agape, then the intent, the attitude toward the opponent, does not seek defeat, it does not seek destruction, but it seeks redemption. Within the acts of this opposition are nested opportunities for the opponent's redemption. Within the acts of this opposition are found indications of goodwill, of understanding, and of hope. Underlying these acts of opposition is an obvious foundation of clear morality which calls out to the opponent as a brother or sister. Seeking to defeat an opponent backs them into a corner, opposing them with agape leaves open a door for cooperation where we can join with them to defeat the common problem.

I'd like to turn now to another prophet, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. Driven from his homeland and his people during the invasion of Tibet by the Chinese, the Dalai Lama has become an international spokesperson for compassion, peace, love, and nonviolence. Despite the tremendous oppression and violence done to the people of Tibet, the Dalai Lama has earnestly and consistently treated the members of the Chinese government with kindness and respect, while publicly condemning the actions of the government. I would like to share with you some of his thoughts on love and enemies.

“Love is the desire to see happiness in those who have been deprived of it. We feel compassion toward those who suffer; this is the desire to see them released from their suffering. We habitually feel affection and love for those closest to us and for our friends, but we feel nothing for strangers and even less for those who seek to harm us. This shows that the love for those closest to us is heavily tinged with attachment and desire and that it is partial. Genuine love is not limited to those close to us but extends to all beings, for it is founded on the knowledge that everyone, like us, wishes to find happiness and avoid suffering. Moreover, this extends to all people the right to find happiness and be free of pain. As such, genuine love is impartial and includes everyone without distinction, including our enemies.

As for compassion, we must not confuse it with commiserating pity, for that is tainted with a certain scorn and gives the impression that we consider ourselves superior to those who suffer. True compassion implies the wish to put an end to others' suffering and a sense of responsibility for those who suffer. This sense of responsibility means that we are committed to finding ways to comfort them in their trouble. True love for our neighbor will be translated into courage and strength. As courage grows, fear abates; this is why kindness and brotherly love are a source of inner strength. The more we develop love for others, the more confidence we will have in ourselves; the more courage we have, the more relaxed and serene we will be.

The opposite of love is malice, the root of all faults. On this basis, how can we define an enemy? Generally, we say an enemy is someone who seeks to harm our person or those who are dear to us, or our possessions; someone, therefore, who opposes or threatens the causes of our contentment and our happiness. When an enemy strikes against our belongings, our friends, or our loved ones, he is striking against our most likely sources of happiness. It would be difficult, however, to affirm that our friends and possessions are the true sources of happiness, because in the end the governing factor is inner peace; it is peace of mind that makes us relaxed and happy, and we become unhappy if we lose it.”

Too often we confuse love with affection and compassion with pity. For what is love, when we have removed all attachment, but the wish for the other's happiness. And what is compassion, when we have removed all traces of condescension and judgment, but the wish for the other's healthiness. Love and compassion in the language of the Dalai Lama are tantamount to the agape that MLK spoke of, a genuine expression of goodwill towards all, a hope for their freedom from suffering and for their experience of happiness.

The other aspect of the Dalai Lama's thought that I think warrants emphasis, is the personal responsibility and ownership that we must take for our own happiness, our own healthiness, our own spiritual development. Because, the key to enlightenment, to love, to compassion is not out there... it is in here. Similarly, the stumbling blocks, the walls, the barriers to enlightenment, the true enemies, are also, in here. And the one power that you have as an individual, the one thing in the whole universe that can never be taken from you, is the power to choose; the power to choose how you view your life, what your priorities are, what you believe in, and how you will live your life within the context that is given to you.

Finally, I would like to share with you some of the words of Mohandas K. Gandhi. For although his prose is not as elegant nor his theology as well articulated as that of Dr. King or the Dalai Lama, Gandhi was a prophet who through his own life made the real possibilities of nonviolent action manifest. His biography stands as a testament to the potential power of each one of us to produce change in the world by living up to the ideals that we hold highest.

"Having flung aside the sword, there is nothing except the cup of love which I can offer to those who oppose me. It is by offering that cup that I expect to draw them close to me. I cannot think of permanent enmity between man and man, and believing as I do in the theory of rebirth, I live in the hope that, if not in this birth, in some other birth, I shall be able to hug all humanity in friendly embrace."

"Whenever I see an erring man, I say to myself I have also erred; when I see a lustful man, I say to myself so was I once; and in this way, I feel kinship with every one in the world and feel that I cannot be happy without the humblest of us being happy. I am too conscious of the imperfections of the species to which I belong to be irritated against any single member thereof. My remedy is to deal with the wrong wherever I see it, not to hurt the wrong-doer, even as I would not like to be hurt for the wrongs I continually do."

"Doesn't the New Testament say, 'If your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left'? I have thought about it a great deal. I suspect he meant you must show courage – be willing to take a blow – several blows – to show you will not strike back – nor will you be turned aside . . . And when you do that it calls upon something in human nature – something that makes his hate for you diminish and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I have seen it work."

"Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good."

Each of these prophets, each of these men, comes from a different religious tradition. Each of them has been tested severely by the tides of history, by the oppression of their people, by violence in their homeland, and by the constant threat of death against their own lives. And each of them, through their own search for truth, has come up with essentially the same answer:

Begin by looking inside, by taking responsibility for yourself, for your own feelings, your own actions.

Let go of anger and fear before they fester into hatred.

Act against injustice wherever you find it.

Tolerate other people, remember that they are just as flawed as we are.

Treat those who oppose you with the respect and human dignity with which you expect to be treated.

This is their advice, and it's a tall order. Some might even argue that it is naïve, that it isn't the way the world works. My answer is this: the philosopher applies the power of intellect to describe how the world works, the prophet applies the power of love to describe how the world could work. That is why I call these three men prophets, and that is why I believe that their wisdom is not for pedestals but was meant to govern the hearts and deeds of each one of us...

I would like to close today with the quote from Gandhi that called me to do this sermon. I offer it to you as a blessing and as a meditation, in hopes that it may bring you closer to God, however you define it.

“...the only devils in the world are those running ‘round in our own hearts, and that is where all our battles ought to be fought.”