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Power of Love

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

On May 19, 2018 the world's attention changed from focusing on the stuff of anger and fear when one man stepped up to a pulpit in the prestigious and historical St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle in Berkshire, England and preached about the power of love. That thirteen-minute sermon got the world's attention, and after he finished preaching, the world wanted to hear more from the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Only a day later Bishop Curry seemed to be everywhere you looked: morning talk shows, You Tube videos, late night talk show monologues, and was even portrayed by cast member Kenan Thompson on Saturday Night Live. For us Episcopalians, it was so exciting. We are not used to our clergy, especially the Presiding Bishop, getting so much positive attention from the world. For us, it felt like the Presiding Bishop was a celebrity. But while he may have had the opportunity to become a celebrity, our Presiding Bishop used the talk show circuit to do something completely different. Instead of talking about himself or promoting a book or a program or even telling people to start going to church, Bishop Curry spoke words the world is so desperately starved to hear: he kept talking about the power of love. Specifically, the love of God in Jesus, and how such love is a form of power that can, in fact, change the world.

Bishop Curry did more than just talk about the power of love, he invited all of us who were listening to embrace what he was saying by making love our way of life. That is a big challenge. And he knows that. So, he gave us a way to start. He didn't start by running down politicians and those in leadership roles. He didn't start by criticizing systems and institutions and governments. He didn't start by being negative or judgmental. He started by inviting us who were listening to imagine what the world would look like if love really was the way. "Imagine our homes and families," he preached, "when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where love is the way." Bishop Curry further spurred our creative imaginations by suggesting that when love is the way hunger and poverty will become things of the past, the earth will be a sanctuary and justice and peace a reality.

Believe it or not, Bishop Curry received criticism for what he said. A friend of mine on social media sneered that he was only talking about romantic love when he clearly said that the love he was talking about was the unselfish, self-sacrificing love of God in Jesus. She wasn't alone. The words of our Presiding Bishop inspired millions and

intimidated and sparked fear in millions more. Because as awesome and inspiring as Bishop Curry's words are, they are not all that unfamiliar to those of us who follow Jesus. If we listen to and read the words of the Gospels, we have indeed seen these words before, just like in today's Gospel.

Today's Gospel is a continuation of Jesus' sermon on the plain, that we heard the beginning of last Sunday. The sermon on the plain is the Gospel of Luke's version of the same sermon delivered by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, only in Matthew it takes place on raised ground and is called Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. Each Gospel has its own perspective, and it is therefore valuable to spend time with each. Today, it is Luke's version we are listening to. And today we hear Jesus continue with his long sermon that spoke about the power of God's love; a love that is abundantly generous and abundantly demanding, blessing those the world would consider of no value, and calling those of us who chose to follow Jesus to practice this powerful love in our lives.

That is a big challenge. And in this sermon, Jesus gives his listeners a way to start. He starts by commanding us to love our enemies (something Jesus said not once but twice in today's Gospel), wishing good to those who hurt us, to give more than someone asks – not just stuff, but to go as far as offering another cheek to strike if that is what someone chooses to do.

Like Bishop Curry's sermon, depending on our perspective, the words of Jesus can sound inspiring or intimidating. Scholars and commentators inform us that Jesus was not intending his words be taken so literally that we followers of his only follow these words to the letter. Instead, Jesus was talking in a way the people of the time, and perhaps our time too, were unfamiliar with, so he was attempting to get their attention and inspire them to start imagining a different way the world could work. A way that is different from violence, racism, classism, sexism and all the other isms that divide us. A way that is different from greed and different from poverty and injustice. A world that was tiredly familiar to the people of Jesus' day.

Jesus was not talking about the familiar way of revenge or retribution that hate and violence perpetuate. Jesus was inviting his listeners to imagine with him a world run by the power of love. The power of God's love that is stronger than the power of anger and hurt that turns neighbors into enemies, that seeks to ease our hurt by making others hurt. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has preached, hate only perpetuates more hate, and violence only perpetuates more violence. But love is redemptive. Dr. King has preached that at its root, love is redemptive and when we discover that and live into that love, we not only can, we will change the world by breaking the cycles of violence and injustice.

One of the problems with all this preaching about love is that too many people understand love as something passive. They hear love forgives and then believe that means when a person is abused. They are to forgive the abuser but not hold that abuser accountable and just forget the whole thing ever happened. This is not the way of love, because there is no liberation there, which means there is no love, and instead of freeing both persons to live into God's love, they both remain trapped in the cycle of violence and anger. Too many people assume the self-sacrificing love of God means always letting someone else have their way, but again there is no love in that. It keeps everyone stuck in a cycle that does not let God or anyone else in. I have noticed that whenever someone has accused me of being a "bad Christian" they are most often not basing their accusation in the scriptures as much as they are mad at me for not fixing their problem for them or doing whatever it is they want me to do, especially when that something is not for the good of the community. Maybe you have been in a similar situation. I find in such circumstances it is helpful to remember what Jesus means by the love of God.

You see, the love of God is not about keeping the status quo. It is not about letting injustice continue just because it is what everyone is familiar with. And it is a sin and shame when the words of Jesus are interpreted that way. Because that interpretation misses Jesus' point completely. Jesus was talking about the way of love that is the only way to liberate all people from the injustice and abuse caused by violence, hate, anger, and their like. Jesus was talking about love as a creative response to the violence and injustices of the world that breaks that cycle of violence and makes room for a new and better way of living, God's way, a way we religious people often call the Kingdom of God or the Beloved Community.

When Jesus said things like love your enemy, he was not talking about letting evil get its way, or fighting fire with fire, he was talking about responding to your enemy or the person who wishes to cause you harm in a different way. One of the people who best showed me how to love my enemy is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who I'm sure we all know as a leader in the civil rights movement. Dr. King was not passive. He was someone who fought hard for change, for racial equality and for the eradication of poverty. In a sermon he delivered called "Loving your Enemy", Dr. King talked about how to practice the Love of God in Christ when it comes to dealing with people who not only disagree with you but wish and choose to hurt you. Dr. King said you love them and was honest that the response wasn't necessarily going to be a complete change of heart for your enemy. They won't like it, Dr. King said, probably from experience. It will make them uncomfortable. It might even make them hate you more. For Dr. King, loving the persons who stood against him meant seeing them as human beings made in God's image, beloved of God, even if Dr. King didn't like them. That power, Dr. King preached is the power that will change the world.

Today we can forget how powerful that message is. While I find and many of you might find that message a good one, not everyone does. We forget Dr. King had lots of enemies that wished him harm, and one succeeded in killing him because Dr. King preached an invitation to imagine what the world would look like if the love of God was the way.

That is what Jesus' sermon on the plain in today's Gospel is calling his followers then and now to do: to imagine a more creative way to respond to the violence and injustice in the world. But when I say it that way, this could easily turn into a dreaming exercise that leads to very little you or I could do. That is why I find Bishop Curry's sermon so helpful. Because he broke down Jesus' invitation to help us understand Jesus wasn't just talking about something outside of our lives, he was talking about how our lives can powerfully impact the larger world. When we imagine how the way of love can impact our families. Or imagine how the way of love might change our community. How might OU be different if love was the way? I imagine if love was the way then there would be no sexual assaults or rapes on campus, no deaths from overconsumption of alcohol, no acts of violence or racism, where no one who is part of the LGBTQ community ever has to fear for their safety, where there is room for everyone regardless of their financial situation or learning abilities or disabilities.

Imagine our parish when love is the way. Imagine Athens when love is the way. Imagining is how we start to embrace God's awesome power of love. And when we are ready, then we can move from imagining to doing what we can, in actions big or small, that show this love to a tired old world that is still desperately hungry to hear and see, from anyone be they bishop or priest or student or professor or spouse or child or plumber or carpenter or secretary or retiree or business owner or anyone else willing to share the power of love that can change the world of pain and violence and injustice into the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom