

FORGIVENESS: PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES

Matthew 5: 43-48

Broadview Community United Church of Christ

March 26, 2006

Rev. Gail Crouch

LENT IS A TIME WHEN WE OFTEN PLACE A CONSCIOUS FOCUS ON PRAYER. BUT WE MAY BE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH PRAYER. I HAVE HAD PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH SAY TO ME, "I'LL DO ANYTHING – USHER, TEACH, CLEAN, LEAD A MEETING, DO FOOD; JUST DON'T ASK ME TO PRAY IN PUBLIC! WE DON'T KNOW THE "RIGHT" WORDS, WE SAY. AND AFTER ALL, GOD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT IS NEEDED; WHO IS HURTING; WHERE THE PAIN AND LOSS RESIDE. WHAT DOES IT MEAN, EXACTLY, TO PRAY FOR OTHERS? HOW ON EARTH WE DO PRAY FOR OUR ENEMIES AS JESUS ASKED US TO DO?

I HOPE YOU WILL HEAR WHAT I OFFER NOT AS A REQUIREMENT, BUT AS AN INVITATION. WE ARE ALL IN DIFFERENT PLACES ON OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS; WE ALL UNDERSTAND PRAYER IN DIFFERENT WAYS. AND I TOO, HAVE STRUGGLED WITH PRAYER, ESPECIALLY HOW IT "WORKS." SO I OFFER THIS SERMON IN A SPIRIT OF COMPANIONSHIP, OF BEING A FELLOW PILGRIM ON A JOURNEY.

LET ME LIST A FEW THINGS THAT I BELIEVE ARE **NOT** NECESSARY FOR PRAYER:

--PRAYER DOES NOT HAVE TO BE DONE THE "RIGHT" WAY FOR THERE IS NO RIGHT WAY.

--PRAYER DOES NOT NEED TO USE SPECIAL HOLY OR THEOLOGICAL WORDS.

--PRAYER IS NOT A MAGICAL FORMULA THAT CREATES INSTANT RESPONSE. IT IS NOT TEXT-MESSAGING!

--PRAYER IS NOT LIMITED TO WORDS ALONE.

I DO BELIEVE THAT PRAYER CAN BE:

--AS NATURAL AS OUR BREATH, LIKE WHEN WE SAY "AHH/OOH" AT A SUNSET

--LAUGHTER

--WORDS WE SAY TO GOD AND TO EACH OTHER

--SILENCE

--ATTENTIVENESS TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER.

I BELIEVE THAT FUNDAMENTALLY, *PRAYER IS A GIFT TO BE CELEBRATED RATHER THAN A DISCIPLINE TO BE LEARNED.* BUT HAVING SAID THAT, I DO THINK IT IS HELPFUL TO BE ATTENTIVE, FAITHFUL AND PERSISTENT IN

PRAYER. PRACTICING ANYTHING IS HELPFUL. BUT IF WE SEE PRAYER AS A GIFT, IT MIGHT RELEASE US FROM ANXIETY ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE DOING IT RIGHT.

* * * * *

THIS MORNING I WANT TO TALK ABOUT ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT KINDS OF PRAYER, AND THE FOCUS OF TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON. HEAR AGAIN THESE WORDS:

YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AND HATE YOUR ENEMY." BUT I SAY TO YOU, LOVE YOUR ENEMIES AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU.

AND THOUGH MANY OF US HAVE OFTEN HEARD THOSE WORDS FROM JESUS ASKING US TO PRAY FOR OUR ENEMIES, IT IS A DISORIENTING INVITATION.

I SUSPECT THAT WHEN MOST OF US HEAR THE WORD ENEMY THESE DAYS, WE THINK ABOUT TERRORISTS, SADDAM HUSSEIN, BIN LADIN, AND WE WILL CONSIDER WHAT IT MEANS TO PRAY FOR THOSE INDIVIDUALS IN A MOMENT. BUT DEALING WITH PEOPLE WE DO NOT PERSONALLY KNOW, WITH FIGURES WE SEE ONLY THROUGH THE LENS OF THE MEDIA, IS DIFFERENT FROM DEALING WITH PEOPLE IN OUR DAILY LIVES.

SO I WANT TO ENCOURGE YOU TO THINK ABOUT PRAYING FOR SOMEONE IN YOUR LIFE WHOM YOU MIGHT CONSIDER TO BE AN ENEMY. WHILE WE MIGHT HESITATE TO USE THE WORD ENEMY, THESE ARE PEOPLE WE BELIEVE HAVE HURT US. THINK OF SOMEONE IN YOUR LIFE WHO HAS DEEPLY HURT OR BETRAYED YOU. IT MIGHT BE SOMEONE FROM YOUR PAST OR PRESENT; SOMEONE WITH WHOM YOU ARE ANGRY; YOU MIGHT EVEN BE SECRETLY HAPPY IF SOMETHING BAD HAPPENED TO THEM. THINK OF A PERSON WHO HAS MADE LIFE DIFFICULT FOR YOU, PERHAPS ACCUSED YOU UNJUSTLY OF SOME ACTION. MOST OF US KNOW SOMEONE LIKE THAT. HEARING THESE WORDS OF JESUS TO LOVE THOSE ENEMIES WHO ARE "UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL" MAY BE AN EVEN MORE DIFFICULT CHALLENGE THAN PRAYING FOR THE GLOBAL FIGURES WE SEE AS ENEMIES.

IN A VERY HELPFUL BOOK, *PRAYING FOR FRIENDS AND ENEMIES*, AUTHOR JANE VENNARD SAYS THAT PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES MUST BEGIN WITH WHAT IS IN OUR HEARTS. AND OFTEN WHAT IS THERE MOST OF ALL IS ANGER. SO, SAYS VENNARD, BEGIN WITH THE ANGER.

THE PSALMS ARE A WONDERFUL WAY TO EXPRESS SOME OF THAT PERSONAL ANGER AS WE HEARD IN TODAY'S READING.

IN PSALM 55, GOD IS ASKED TO BRING DEATH UPON THE ONE WHO HURTS AND DESTROYS ME. IN NUMEROUS PSALMS, THE WRITER CRIES OUT FOR GOD TO PUNISH THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN HURTFUL. SAYS VENNARD, STARTING TO PRAY WHERE OUR HEARTS ARE, RATHER THAN WHERE WE THINK THEY SHOULD BE, ACTUALLY BRINGS US CLOSER TO GOD BECAUSE WE ARE BEING HONEST.

SO PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO HURT US, WHO PERSECUTE US, WHO BETRAY US, BEGINS WITH WHAT IS IN OUR HEARTS. IF I AM FILLED WITH FURY, I NEED TO EXPRESS THAT; IF I AM VERY AFRAID, I NEED TO CRY OUT MY FEAR TO GOD; IF I WANT TO SEE MY ENEMY REMOVED FROM THE FACE OF THE EARTH – OR AT LEAST FROM MY LIFE – I NEED TO PRAY THAT. THE FIRST STEP IN PRAYING FOR ENEMIES, SAYS VENNARD, IS TO BE OPEN, HONEST AND VULNERABLE WITH GOD. WE MIGHT BE ANGRY BECAUSE SOMEONE HAS LEFT US, DIED OR DIVORCED US OR SIMPLY WALKED OUT OF OUR LIVES. PERHAPS WE HAVE BEEN THE VICTIM OF ABUSE OR BETRAYAL. AND BEING HONEST MAY EVEN INCLUDE EXPRESSING SOME ANGER AT GOD – AND THAT IS ALRIGHT. GOD LOVES US ENOUGH TO HEAR OUR ANGER AND NOT TURN AWAY.

AND WHEN WE HAVE RAGED AND CRIED AND VOICED OUR PAIN LONG ENOUGH, I DO BELIEVE THAT GOD CAN SOFTEN OUR HEARTS AND OPEN US TO OTHER POSSIBILITIES. WHEN WE ARE WILLING TO START OUR PRAYERS WHEREVER OUR HEARTS ARE, GOD MOVES WITHIN US SO THAT WE BEGIN TO SEE THE POSSIBLITIY OF PRAYING EVEN FOR OUR ENEMIES.

BUT SOMETIMES WE NEED HELP GETTING TO THAT PLACE. THAT IS WHEN IT IS HELPFUL TO HAVE A PRAYER PARTNER, SOMEONE ELSE WHO WILL PRAY FOR YOUR ENEMY FOR AWHILE AS YOU LET GOD PREPARE THE GROUND OF YOUR HEART.

*

*

*

SOME YEARS AGO I WAS DEEPLY BETRAYED BY A COLLEAGUE. HE LIED TO ME, USED ME, DID GREAT DAMAGE TO A FAITH COMMUNITY I LOVE. AS I SAT WITH MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, I RAGED AGAINST THIS MAN. “I WANT YOU TO PRAY FOR HIM,” SAID KATHY. “NO WAY,” I CRIED – “I CANNOT DO THAT.” “THEN I WILL PRAY FOR HIM,” SHE GENTLY SAID. I WAS INCENSED! SHE WAS *MY* SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, *I* WANTED HER PRAYERS! I ALWAYS PRAY FOR YOU, SHE REASSURED ME, BUT I WILL ALSO PRAY FOR THIS MAN YOU CONSIDER AN ENEMY. AND I WANT YOU TO TRY AND HOLD HIM IN YOUR PRAYERS.

I AM A LITTLE EMBARRASED TO ADMIT THAT FOR AWHILE MY PRAYERS TO GOD ABOUT THIS COLLEAGUE WERE FILLED WITH ANGER AND A DESIRE FOR REVENGE. MAKE HIM HURT AS MUCH AS HE HAS HURT US, I CRIED TO GOD. BUT I KNEW KATHY WAS PRAYING FOR HIM – AND ME – AND THAT SHE WAS ALSO PRAYING FOR OUR HEALING.

THEN ONE DAY, SITTING IN SILENCE, SOMETHING SHIFTED IN MY HEART, OR PERHAPS AS MARCUS BORG SAYS, MY HEART CRACKED OPEN, AND I REALIZED THAT THIS MAN WAS HURTING TOO! HE HAD LOST HIS FAITH COMMUNITY, HIS MARRIAGE, AND MOST OF HIS FRIENDS. I WAS NOT GOING TO EXCUSE THE PAIN HE HAD CAUSED, BUT I BEGAN TO FEEL I COULD SAY TO GOD, BE WITH HIM IN HIS PAIN, HEAL HIM, O GOD, WALK TOO WITH HIM.

IT DID NOT HAPPEN SUDDENLY – IT TOOK A LONG TIME. BUT BY STARTING WHERE MY HEART WAS, BEING PERSISTENTLY IN PRAYER, KNOWING SOMEONE ELSE WAS PRAYING FOR HIM, I EVENTUALLY REACHED THE PLACE WHERE I COULD PRAY FOR MY ENEMY - AND THEN HE WAS NO LONGER AN ENEMY. I WAS NOT EXCUSING HIS ACTIONS AND I SUPPORTED THE ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS HE WENT THROUGH AS HE LOST HIS MINISTERIAL CREDENTIALS. BUT FOR THE SAKE OF MY HEALING, IN MY DESIRE TO TRY AND FOLLOW JESUS, SOME SENSE OF FORGIVENESS CAME AND PRAYER ALLOWED ME TO MOVE FORWARD. I HAVE NO ILLUSIONS IT WAS MY OWN STRENGTH OR FAITHFULNESS THAT DID THIS. I KNOW THAT MY SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR’S PRAYERS, THE PRAYERS OF OTHERS, AND GOD’S OWN GRACIOUSNESS, LED ME TO THAT PLACE.

* * * *

THE COMMAND TO PRAY FOR OUR ENEMIES IS VERY COUNTER-CULTURAL. OUR NATIONAL LEADERS, BOTH POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS, OFTEN CALL US TO BE AFRAID, VERY AFRAID OF THOSE WHO MIGHT HARM US. BUT THERE STANDS JESUS, CALLING US TO SPEAK IN A DIFFERENT VOICE, TO ACT IN A DIFFERENT WAY. THE PROCESS OF PRAYING FOR ANOTHER – FRIEND OR ENEMY – BEGINS WITH GOD. GOD ALREADY LOVES US AND IS PART OF OUR LIVES AND THE LIVES OF THOSE FOR WHOM WE PRAY. IN A SENSE, GOD IS BOTH THE BEGINNING AND THE DESTINATION IN THE PROCESS OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER.

BUT OFTEN IT FEELS BEYOND OUR ABILITY TO PRAY FOR SOME PEOPLE. MANY PEOPLE THESE DAYS ARE AFRAID – OF WAR, OF TERRORISM, OF A DIFFICULT ECONOMY. AND WE STRUGGLE TO PLACE THESE FEARS SOMEWHERE, ON SOMEONE. IN DIFFICULT TIMES, THE TEMPTATION TO DEMONIZE IS GREAT. THERE MUST BE SOMEONE WE CAN BLAME!

I KNOW SOME OF US STRUGGLE RIGHT NOW TO HOLD SADDAM HUSSEIN IN PRAYER, OR OSAMA BIN LADEN AND HIS FOLLOWERS. SOME OF US FIND IT DIFFICULT TO PRAY FOR GEORGE BUSH. HOW DO WE PRAY FOR PEOPLE WE BELIEVE ARE A THREAT TO US AND WORLD PEACE? WE MAY FIND OURSELVES PRAYING THAT THEY WILL BE WISE, THAT THEY WILL SEEK GOD’S WILL. BUT WHAT IF THEY ARE PRAYING THAT ALSO? WHAT

IF THEY ARE SITTING IN PRAYER AND ASKING FOR HELP? I AGONIZE OVER THE ARROGANCE I SEE DISPLAYED BY MANY LEADERS THAT GOD SPEAKS ONLY TO THEM AND THEY ALONE HAVE “THE TRUTH.” WE CANNOT KNOW THE MIND OF GOD. WE CAN ONLY SEE AND HEAR GLIMPSES OF THE DIVINE THROUGH THE LIFE OF JESUS. PERHAPS ALL WE CAN DO FOR THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE IS SIMPLY SET THEM BEFORE GOD AND TRUST IN HER AMAZING GRACE.

THIS WEEK I SAT WITH THE STUDENTS I WORK WITH AT SEATTLE UNIVERSITY. THEY TALKED ABOUT THE DESPAIR, ANGER AND FRUSTRATION THEY AND OTHERS IN THEIR CONGREGATIONS FEEL. “SOMETIMES IT SEEMS LIKE A DARK NIGHT WE ARE LIVING IN,” SAID ONE “AND I OFTEN FIND IT NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO PRAY. FOR WHAT DO I PRAY? CONVERSION OF HEARTS? AGREEMENT BETWEEN WORLD RELIGIONS? WHERE DO WE EVEN BEGIN?” THEN ANOTHER STUDENT SHARED THAT READING POETRY HELPED HER, THAT IT WAS A FORM OF PRAYER. JUST THAT MORNING, SHE SHARED, SHE HAD READ A POEM BY JANE KENYON.

THIS POET WAS A VIBRANT WOMAN, A MEMBER OF A UCC CHURCH IN NEW HAMPSHIRE, WHO DIED AT AGE 47 FROM LEUKEMIA. STRUGGLING WITH THE ILLNESS AND HER IMPENDING DEATH, JANE KENYON WROTE A POEM TITLED “**LET EVENING COME.**” THE LAST THREE STANZAS READ:

*LET THE FOX GO BACK TO ITS SANDY DEN.
LET THE WIND DIE DOWN. LET THE SHED GO BLACK INSIDE.
LET EVENING COME.*

*TO THE BOTTLE IN THE DITCH, TO THE WIND
THAT BLOWS,, TO AIR IN THE LUNGS
LET EVENING COME.*

*LET IT COME, AS IT WILL, AND DON'T BE AFRAID. GOD DOES NOT LEAVE US
COMFORTLESS. SO LET EVENING COME.*

SAID MY STUDENT, THAT IS MY PRAYER FOR THESE DAYS; TO TRUST AND LET EVENING COME BECAUSE GOD FILLS THE EVENING SPACE, IS A COMPASSIONATE GOD AND BRINGS US INTO THE MORNING LIGHT.

I BELIEVE THAT ONE OF THE PRAYERS WE MOST NEED TO UTTER THESE DAYS IS A PRAYER FOR COMPASSION – COMPASSION FOR WORLD LEADERS, FOR THOSE WHO ARE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AND WAR, FOR THOSE WHO MAY BE ASKED TO GIVE THEIR LIVES IN THE PURSUIT OF PEACE. TOM FOX WAS A PEACE ACTIVIST IN IRAQ WHO WAS KIDNAPPED,

TORTURED AND MURDERED THIS MONTH. HE WAS A GOOD AND GENTLE MAN AND HIS DEATH WAS TOO VIOLENT AND SENSELESS, AND YET, FROM HIS QUAKER CONGREGATION AND FRIENDS, CAME THESE WORDS:

‘WE BELIEVE THAT TOM WOULD NOT WANT REVENGE FOR HIS DEATH. HE WOULD WANT ONLY A RENEWED FEVOR FOR PEACE.’”

.I FERVENTLY BELIEVE JESUS IS ASKING US IN THIS GOSPEL LESSON TODAY TO PRAY FOR ALL THOSE INVOLVED: FOR THOSE WHO KILLED TOM; FOR SOLDIERS WHO STRIVE TO KEEP THE PEACE AND FOR THOSE WHO SEEK ALTERNATIVES TO WAR. THE GREATEST BETRAYAL OF JESUS’ COMMAND TO PRAY FOR AND LOVE OUR ENEMIES MAY BE TO NOT PRAY AT ALL.

DESMOND TUTU HAS SAID THAT PRAYER IS NAMING AND CASTING OUT THE DEMONS THAT SILENCE US AND MAKE US DOCILE BEFORE THE STATUS QUO. WITHOUT PRAYER, HE SAYS, IDEALS BECOME EMPTY RESPONSES, VALUES LOSE THEIR PASSION, AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS BECOMES CYNICISM. JUST AND PROPHETIC ANGER MUST BE CONNECTED TO LOVE.

OUR PRAYER LIVES WILL NOT BE DISCONNECTED FROM LOVE IF THEY ARE ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD RATHER THAN IN SETS OF SPIRITUAL RULES. FOR MUCH OF WHAT PRAYER IS ALL ABOUT, IS SEEKING SHALOM, BE PREPARED TO BE SURPRISED. FOR OUR GOD LOVES US WITH SUCH DEEP AND ABIDING LOVE THAT OPENING UP TO THE POWER OF THAT LOVE IN PRAYER, MAY CRACK OUR HEARTS WIDE OPEN. AND THEN OUR ENEMIES WILL BECOME THOSE WE CAN PRAY FOR AND THE ONES WE FEAR WILL BECOME OUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS. AMEN.