A SPIRIT OF GENTLENESS

July 7, 2019

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20; Galatians 6:1-16

Last Sunday in our gospel lesson, two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, asked Jesus to command fire to come down from heaven and consume a Samaritan village just because the people there had refused to receive Jesus into their community. Instead of doing what James and John had requested, Jesus rebuked them for their retaliatory response and simply moved on to another village. However, as a result of this exchange, Jesus takes the opportunity in our gospel lesson for today to offer his disciples instructions about how they ought to respond to a town that may not welcome them. “Whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you,” Jesus says, “go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we will wipe off in protest against you. However, know that the realm of God still has come near to you.’”

This realm of God to which Jesus gives witness is not based upon retaliation or revenge when it comes to responding to someone who refuses to welcome us or even chooses to shun and reject us. Our natural inclination would be to get totally upset and angry at those who shut the door in our face and then try to break down the door or walk away in such a rage that we would have to figure out how to retaliate in some form or another later on. Sometimes our retaliation isn’t so overt, but rather comes out in all kinds of passive-aggressive behavior that does nothing to mend or heal this broken relationship. If and when we react in this way, we move farther and farther away from the realm of God that has come near to us in the Spirit of Jesus, our Christ.

Here is where the Apostle Paul joins in our dialogue this morning by addressing the people at Galatia and telling those who have received the Holy Spirit that if anyone is detected in a transgression within the community, they are to restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness because the temptation in this situation would be to try to get back at the person and perhaps even cast that person out of the community. The primary rubric that Paul offers in this situation is that we are to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ—that law being that we are to love one another as God in Christ has loved each and every one of us.

Most often when we hear this directive about bearing one another’s burdens, we usually think of situations like accompanying someone who is sick, being with a friend who is depressed, consoling someone whose boyfriend has just left her, feeding people who are chronically hungry, or comforting someone whose parent has died. Very seldom do we ever think about bearing someone else’s burden as involving the gift of gently helping that person admit the wrong that they have done and setting that person free from their burden of guilt by offering them the gift of forgiveness. And yet, this is the specific situation that Paul describes when he talks about bearing one another’s burdens.

Then Paul issues a warning. If anyone thinks that they are better than this person who has been caught in this transgression or thinks that they are without sin, then they only deceive themselves because none of us is above the law of Christ whose Spirit fills us with the gentleness that we need to be able to hold a person accountable for their wrongdoing and then forgive that person. This spirit of gentleness has no room for retaliation, revenge, or rejection, but has plenty of room for reconciliation, restoration, and rehabilitation.

We cannot mention these positive words that are grounded in the love of God without thinking about our criminal justice system today and all of the ways that we have allowed this system to be used to incarcerate and enslave people for the color of their skin, to imprison people who have no means of paying for their defense, to punish people whose offenses do not warrant one single day in jail, and now to throw people, including children, who are seeking asylum into mass confinement no matter whether they have crossed our border legally or illegally, and punishing, maltreating, and rejecting them as if they were the scum of the earth.

All of us should be out in the streets and saying to our governing authorities, “The dust of this country that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you for you have not welcomed those who have come here out of fear for their lives.” We know that these people are human beings who are beloved children of God no matter their religion, and, from our Christian perspective, are the presence of Christ in our midst. As Jesus warns his disciples today, “Whoever rejects these people rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the One who has sent me.”

When will we realize that with the arrival of all of these immigrants, the realm of God continues to come near to us to give us the opportunity to determine how welcoming we can be? We have this amazing opportunity to bear the burdens of these people whose lives have been threatened by poverty and violence, and in this way fulfill the law of Christ’s love, but what are we doing? We are treating their attempt to escape for their lives as a transgression and placing them in the harsh conditions of what some have called concentration camps as punishment for trespassing our precious border. There is nothing gentle about ripping children away from their parents, placing them in cages, and traumatizing them for the rest of their lives.

You probably didn’t come here today to hear about all of these atrocities that are so much a part of our daily news. Like those who are escaping for their lives, we all long for a place to which we can escape to find solace and peace from all of the awful things that are happening in the world around us. I am sure that Jesus’ disciples would have preferred to stay in the safe and relatively secure confines of their own community. However, Jesus challenges them today and sends them out two-by-two with these words, “I am sending you out like gentle lambs into the midst of wolves. In doing so, I give you the authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you.”

This metaphor makes it sound like we can do anything in our power to stomp out those who are a part of the oppressive, corrupt, and violent system in which we live, or to use whatever force or violence is necessary to overthrow and defeat our enemy. However, none of this use of violence is sanctioned by Jesus as the way of dealing with those who might be doing evil against us or against others. Jesus demonstrated this point in the way that he chose to tread on the snakes and scorpions of his day and stood up to the power of his adversaries. As a gentle lamb, Jesus walked into the midst of wolves, protested their oppressive, corrupt, and violent ways, spoke truth to their power, and paid the price with his life—thereby making his death on the cross his final protest against the principalities and powers of this world not with a word of condemnation, but rather with a word of forgiveness.

By breaking the seal of Pontius Pilate on Jesus’ tomb and raising Jesus from the dead, God actually continued this protest against the governing authorities of that day, and demonstrated to all of Jesus’ followers that, in the end, whatever suffering they might endure as a result of protesting against the wolves, snakes, and scorpions of their day, their suffering would be replaced with a new life—one in which there would be no more hurt as the result of being faithful to the will of God and faithful to the gentle way of Jesus—gentle, that is, in comparison to all of the vengeful, hostile, and violent ways of this world.

As one of the attributes within the fruit of the Spirit, the Apostle Paul reminds Jesus’ disciples at Galatia to use this gentleness as the way of dealing with those who use their power to lord themselves over others or to resort to violence to get their own way—this abuse of power that we are witnessing today in so many ways throughout our land. Instead of sowing this same kind of violence that only begets more violence, we are to take every opportunity we can to strive for the good of all, even in protest, to ensure that the law of Christ’s gentle and inclusive love for one another extends even to our enemies. As Holly Near reminds us in her song of protest, “We are a gentle, loving people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.” Amen.