

“The Most Difficult Part About Christianity”

Luke 6:27-36

July 30th, 2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

As an introduction to the reading for today, I'll draw your attention to the parallel gospels reproduced in your bulletin on page 4. Our text from Luke falls within the material commonly referred to as “the Beatitudes” (because several of Jesus’ sentences begin with “Blessed” are those who do such and such.) Matthew and Luke were independently using another person’s story of Jesus life (of which we don’t have a copy today) but that scholars refer to as the “Q” gospel.¹ What Matthew and Luke were doing was presenting a summary of most of Jesus’ core teachings – parables and sayings He would typically teach as He moved around Palestine as an itinerant speaker.

So you can see how Luke is presenting Jesus’ material, notice, before the main text is read, how Luke places a slightly different emphasis on His core teachings. Don’t forget, just because his material is somewhat different from Matthew’s, it doesn’t mean there is a problem. The small differences between Matthew and Luke’s accounts merely show that as they heard Jesus’ teachings, at different times and in different contexts, both of them were impressed and inspired, in different ways, with the powerful life-transforming message of Christ.

But look in Matthew’s column as he has a more spiritualized (or piety-oriented) emphasis. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”² A little later, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”³

Look, then, over to Luke’s version. “Blessed are you who are poor, . . .”⁴ The next verse, “Blessed are you who hunger now, . . . you who weep now.”⁵ Unlike for Matthew, Luke doesn’t write about spiritual piety but real financial poverty, real hunger and real sorrow.

Then, in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus ends His talk about blessedness by cautioning believers that they will be hated and persecuted. They’ll be thrown out and discredited as being evil by the very sons of the authorities who murdered God’s prophets in the past.

Then Luke leads up to material that only he includes – harsh warnings (that you see on the top right column of your bulletin on page 5). In keeping with his acute disgust

¹ In Matthew’s column, or the “Sermon on the Mount,” he had Jesus preaching it on a mountain side. In Luke’s material, he had Jesus delivering the words on a plain.

² In Matthew 5:3

³ Matthew 5:6

⁴ Luke 6:20b

⁵ Luke 6:21

with the oppressive gulf between the wealthy and the impoverished in that first century society, Luke presents Jesus’ stern and ominous warnings to the rich. ‘If you’re rich now, what you have now will only be as good as it gets for you. If you’re full now, you’re going to become hungry. You laugh now but later, you’ll be mourning and weeping.’⁶

So as you hear the text from Luke 6:27 (on page 5 of your bulletin), carefully notice how Luke provides verses the other gospel writers did not include. This teaching of Jesus is the most radical, outlandish and ethically ridiculous philosophy in the history of humanity – and Luke, more than anyone else, is really holding this up right in our face to show us better than any other gospel writer.

Luke 6:27-36

Look at the bolded material in Luke’s column. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”⁷ If you had been drafted into the military and you were to quote these words to your drill sergeant, you’d be thrown out of the armed forces.

It’s no big deal, Jesus goes on, to be friendly to your friends. What matters is that you (here it is again) love the very people who are your enemies – doing good, even lending your hard-earned money without even expecting it to be returned.⁸ (On the bottom of page 5), Luke’s “Be merciful” – (notice over in Matthew his more piously oriented words, “Be perfect.”)⁹

And notice how Luke follows this, (in your bulletin on page 6). Just in case His listeners didn’t get the point, Jesus explicitly talks about not being a judging or condemning kind of person. We’re supposed to be forgiving in our nature. We are to give to others in a way that we end up giving more than others ever expected.¹⁰

If you walked away from Jesus’ teaching from hearing that, what would you have? You’d have a philosophy and religion that is counter cultural, revolutionary and radically opposite the way our society usually operates. If you taught and lived by these things, you’d be hated, thrown

⁶ Obviously a paraphrase of Luke’s 6:24-26

⁷ Luke 6:27

⁸ Paraphrasing Luke 6:35; Matthew includes Jesus’ teaching on non-retaliation included in his 5:38-48

⁹ Matthew 5:48

¹⁰ Luke 6:37-42

out of almost every institution in our nation and probably killed – as was done to Jesus.

Nobody – none of us – appreciate these aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it's too difficult to live this way. Instead, we live as if we have to keep the war going on. But Jesus was telling us to stop the war and live out our days with an open heart.

Most all of us tend to make war against the way things are. To follow a path with heart, we must first understand how it is that we are usually making war within ourselves and the rest of life. We must understand how it begins and how it ends. War's roots are in ignorance. Without understanding, we can easily become frightened by life's fleeting changes, our inevitable losses, our disappointments and our insecurity about our own aging and inevitable death.

Our misunderstanding leads us to flight against life. We run from pain or grasp for security and pleasures that, by their very nature, can never satisfy us.¹¹

We express our war against life in every part of our experience – both inwardly and outwardly. Our children and grandchildren see, on an average, eighteen thousand murders and violent acts on TV before they even finish high school. After a definitive 30 year research project, by four national health associations, they have established clear links between media violence and real-life violence.¹² The leading cause of injury for American women is being beaten by the men with whom they live. We carry on wars within ourselves, with our families and communities, among races and nations worldwide. The wars between nations are a reflection of our own inner conflicts and fears.

Our culture teaches us to deny or suppress our awareness of reality. Our society conditions us to protect ourselves from any direct difficulty (or even) discomfort. We expend enormous amounts of energy denying our

¹¹ This is the work of Jack Kornfield, "Stopping The War" Chapter 2 in his insightful *A Path With Heart, A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, p.22-30 ISBN 0-553-37211-4. I have made numerous edits in writing style to make his contributions more adaptable to a Sunday morning sermon format.

¹² A statement published by the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. See *The Buffalo News*, 7/28/2000 p A8. The four groups said: Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of setting conflicts. Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life. Viewing violence may lead to real-life violence.

insecurity, fighting pain, death and loss and in so doing, we hide from the basic truths of the natural world and the limitations our own life.

To insulate ourselves from the way life is, in reality, we have air conditioners, heated cars and clothes that protect us from every season. To insulate ourselves from the specter of aging and infirmity, we put smiling young people in our advertisements while we relegate our old people to nursing homes and old-age establishments. We hide our mental patients in mental hospitals. We relegate our poor to ghettos. We construct freeways around these ghettos so that those of us, who are fortunate enough not to live in them, won't have to see their suffering.

We deny death to the extent that even a ninety-six-year old woman, newly admitted to a hospice, complained to the director, "Why me?" We almost pretend that our dead aren't dead, dressing the deceased in fancy clothes and makeup to attend their own funerals – as if they are attending a party. In this charade with ourselves, we pretend that our war is not really war. We have changed the name of the War Department to the Defense Department and call a whole class of nuclear missiles Peace Keepers!

How do we manage, so consistently, to close ourselves off from the truths of our existence? We use denial to turn away from the pains and difficulties of life. We use addictions to support our denial.

Our culture has been called "The Addicted Society." We have over twenty million alcoholics, ten million drug addicts and millions addicted to gambling, food, sexuality, unhealthy relationships or the speed and busyness of work.

Our addictions are the compulsively repetitive attachments we use to avoid feeling any discomfort and to deny *any* of the difficulties of our lives.

Advertising urges us to keep pace, to keep consuming, smoking, drinking and craving food, money and sex. Our addictions serve to numb us to what is – to help us avoid our own experience. With great fanfare our society encourages these addictions.

Anne Wilson Schaefer, author of *When Society Becomes an Addict*, has described it this way:

"The best-adjusted person in our society is the person who is not dead and not alive, just numb – a zombie. When you are dead, you're not able to do the work of the society. When you are fully alive, you should constantly be doing the work of saying "No" to many of the institutionalized and personalized processes of society: the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water and eating carcinogenic foods. So it is in the best interest of the institutionalized evil to promote those things that take the edge off – the things that

keep us busy with our fixes – the things that keep us slightly numbed out and zombie-like. In this way, our modern consumer society turns each of us into addicts.”

Our Addiction to Speed

One of our most pervasive addictions is to speed. Technological society pushes us to increase the pace of our productivity and the pace of our lives. Panasonic recently introduced a new VHS tape recorder that was advertised as playing voice tapes at double the normal speed while lowering the tone to the normal speaking range. “Therefore,” the advertiser said, “you can listen to one of the great speeches by Winston Churchill, President Kennedy or a literary classic in half the time!” I wonder if they would recommend double-speed tapes for Mozart and Beethoven as well.

Woody Allen commented on this obsession, saying he took a course in speed reading and was able to read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. “It’s about Russia,” he concluded.

Our Loneliness

Our society almost demands life at double time – speed and addictions that numb us to our own experience. In our culture, it is almost impossible to settle into our bodies or stay connected with our hearts, let alone connect with one another or the earth where we live. Instead, we find ourselves increasingly isolated and lonely – cut off from one another and the natural web of life. We’re cut-off, alone in our car or house, yet with our cellular phone, Walkman radio clamped to our ears. Despite all this “communication” technology, there is a deep loneliness and sense of inner poverty. Loneliness is the most pervasive sorrow in our modern society.

Not only have we lost the sense of our interconnection with others, this isolation has become the sorrow of nations, as well. The forces of separation and denial breed international misunderstanding, ecological disaster and an endless series of international conflicts.

On this earth, as of this morning, more than forty wars and violent revolutions are killing thousands of men, women and children. We’ve had 115 wars since World War II and there are only 165 countries in the entire world. Not a good track record for the human species, yet what are we to do?

Genuine Christian spirituality¹³ requires us to learn how to stop the war. This is a first step but actually it must be practiced over and over until it becomes our way of life. The inner stillness of a person who is truly “at peace” brings peace to the whole interconnected web of life – both inner and outer. To stop the war, we need to begin with ourselves.

¹³ Kornfield used the words “genuine spiritual practice” not “Christian spirituality.” I’m obviously adapting the truth of which he speaks to our own faith.

Mahatma Gandhi understood this when he said, “I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very little influence.”

Like Gandhi, we cannot easily change ourselves for the better through an act of will. This is like wanting the mind to get rid of itself or pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

Remember how short-lived most of our New Year’s resolutions are? When we struggle to change ourselves, we, in fact, only continue in our patterns of self-judgment and aggression. We keep the war against ourselves alive. Such acts of will usually backfire and, in the end, often strengthen the addictions or the denials we had intended to change.

When we step out of the battle, we see all of our lives with a different perspective – “with eyes unclouded by (always) longing” (for something else we don’t yet have.)¹⁴ We see how we create our own conflicts. We see our constant likes and dislikes. We seem to fight or resist all that frightens us. We see our own prejudice, possessiveness and territorialism.

All this is hard for us to look at but it is reality for each of us. Then, underneath these ongoing battles, we see pervasive feelings of incompleteness and fear. We feel that without all the pieces of the puzzle of our lives, somehow we aren’t worth anything. We see how much our struggle with life has kept our heart closed.

But when we let go of our battles and open our heart to people and things as they are, it is then that we come to rest in the present moment. (We find that God is with us after all and we can let go of the grasping, hoarding, judging and our lack of kindness – we can let go of our useless attempt to control everything and everyone – as if we could ever do it in the first place. We can stop the war within us.)

This is the beginning and the end of true spirituality.¹⁵ Only in this moment can we discover what is timeless. Only here can we find the love that we seek.

You see, love in the past is simply memory and love in the future is fantasy. Only in the reality of the present can we find love and wake up to find peace and understanding and connection with ourselves and the world around us.

¹⁴ Kornfield quoting from the Tao to Ching

¹⁵ “spiritual practice” in Kornfield’s words

A sign in a Las Vegas casino aptly says, “You Must Be Present to Win.” Stopping the war and becoming present are two sides of the same activity. To come fully into the present is to stop the war. To come into the present means to fully face and experience whatever is here and now.

Most of us have spent our lives caught up in plans, expectations or ambitions for the future – or we have gotten stuck in regrets, guilt or shame about the past. When we return to the reality of the present, however, we begin to be more fully involved with life around us but we also encounter the things we have been avoiding. So it takes courage to face whatever is present – our pain, our desires, our grief, our loss, our secret hopes, our love – everything that moves us most deeply.

As we stop the war, each of us will find something from which we have been running. It may be our loneliness, our feelings of unworthiness, our boredom, our shame or our unfulfilled desires. We must fully and honestly face these parts of ourselves in order to fully live.

You may have heard of “out-of-the-body experiences,” full of light and visions. A true spiritual path demands something more challenging – something that could be called an “in-the-body experience.” We must connect to our body, to our feelings, to our life – as it is now – if we are to awaken.

In order to fully live in the present moment, we have to have an ongoing and unwavering commitment to face the reality of our life as it is now. As we follow our spiritual path in our Christian faith, we are required to stop the war not once but many times. Over and over, we feel the familiar tug of thoughts and reactions that take us away from the present moment.

When we slow down, stop and listen, we can feel how each thing that we fear or crave (really two sides of the same dissatisfaction) propels us away from our heart into a false idea of how we would like life to be. If we listen, even more closely, to what is going on now, we can feel how we have been trained to limit our lives by fear and be controlled by always craving for more things. By limiting ourselves, we end up believing that our own happiness can only come about by possessing something or obtained only at someone else’s expense.

To stop the war and to come into the present is to discover a greatness of our own heart that makes the happiness of others the same as our own. When we let ourselves feel the fear, the discontent, the difficulties we have always avoided, our heart softens. Just as it is a courageous act to face all the difficulties from which we have always run, it is also an act of compassion.

According to Eastern religions,¹⁶ “compassion” is the “quivering of the pure heart” when we have allowed ourselves to be touched by the pain of life. The knowledge that we can do this and survive helps us awaken to the greatness of our own heart. With greatness of heart, we can carry on in the midst of life’s suffering – in the midst of life’s fleeting impermanence. We can be fully open to all of the world’s joys and sorrows.

Wisdom

As we allow the world to deeply touch us, we recognize that just as there is pain in our own lives, there is the same pain in everyone else’s life. This is the birth of our wisdom. Wise understanding sees that suffering is inevitable – that all beings who are born, die. Wise understanding sees and accepts life as a whole.

With wise understanding, we allow ourselves to contain all things, both dark and light, and we come to be at peace. This is not the peace of denial or running away but it is the peace we find in the heart that has rejected nothing, that touches all things with compassion. It is the peace of the heart we experience from the presence of God’s Holy Spirit within us.

When we stop the war, we can embrace our own personal grief and sorrow, joy and triumph. With openness of heart,¹⁷ we can be fully open to the people around us, to our family, to our community, to the social problems of the world and to our collective history. With wise understanding we can live in harmony with our life, with the universal law¹⁸ of God’s Holy Spirit Who reveals the truth of life.¹⁹

This is a task for all of us. Individually and as a society, we must move from the pain of our speed, our addictions and our denial to stop the war. The greatest of transformations can come from this simple act of living in the moment – fully being open to everything in this moment. We can stop fighting what already is and find the reality of God in our lives.

Compassion and a greatness of heart happens whenever we stop the war. The deepest desire we have for our human heart is to discover how to do this. We all share a longing to go beyond the confines of our own fear, beyond our anger or addiction – to connect with something greater than “I,” “me” and “mine” – greater than our small story and our small self.

¹⁶ Buddhist particularly

¹⁷ Kornfield expresses it “greatness of heart”

¹⁸ Which Kornfield calls “the Tao or dharma”

¹⁹ “of God’s Holy Spirit Who reveals” is my addition, not the author’s original words

It is possible to stop the war and come into the timeless present – to touch the Great Ground Of Being Who contains all things. This is the purpose of our spiritual discipline and of choosing a path with heart – to discover peace and connectedness in ourselves and to stop the war in us and around us.²⁰ ■

A Guided Meditation:

Sit comfortably for a few minutes, letting your body be at rest. Let your breathing be easy and natural. Bring your attention into the present, sit quietly, and notice whatever sensations are present in your body. In particular, be aware of any sensations, tensions, or pains you may have been fighting. Do not try to change them, simply notice them with an interested and kind attention. In each area of struggle you discover, let your body relax and your heart soften. Open to whatever you experience without fighting. Let go of the battle. Breathe quietly and let it be.

Then, after a time, shift your attention to your heart and mind. Now notice what feelings and thoughts are present. In particular, be aware of any feelings or thoughts you are now struggling with, fighting, denying, or avoiding. Notice them with an interested and kind attention. Let your heart be soft. Open to whatever you experience without fighting. Let go of the battle. Breathe quietly and let it be.

Continue to sit quietly. Then cast your attention over all the battles that still exist in your life. Sense them inside yourself. If you have an ongoing struggle with your body, be aware of that. If you have been fighting inner wars with your feelings, been in conflict with your own loneliness, fear, confusion, grief, anger, or addiction, sense the struggle you have been waging. Notice the struggles in your thoughts as well. Be aware of how you have carried on the inner battles. Notice the inner armies, the inner dictators, the inner fortifications. Be aware of all that you have fought within yourself, of how long you have perpetuated the conflict.

Gently, with openness, allow each of these experiences to be present. Simply notice each of them in turn with interest and kind attention. In each area of struggle, let your body, heart, and mind be soft. Open to whatever you experience without fighting. Let it be present just as it is. Let go of the battle. Breathe quietly and let yourself be at rest. Invite all parts of yourself to join you at, the peace table in your heart. ■



²⁰ “intentional Christian” are my words, not Kornfield.