

Homily – Love Is Real

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Last Sunday after we finished our visit with the Bishop, Jeff and I watched the Superbowl with some friends. Our friends have a very large flat screen TV, and I noticed something that I don't usually see on our TV at home. During the Superbowl ads I noticed that much of the ad was not real. It was CGI or computer generated. Curiously within the same ad, parts of it had the real actor and parts had a very well done computer generated image of the same actor. I don't know why the advertisers do this. Maybe it is more cost effective or maybe it is easier to generate some of the wild scenes of the Superbowl ad with the computer. Whatever the case, the ads were a combination of real and fake.

Over the last couple of years there has been a lot of talk about truth. Truth has become kind of squishy, and we wonder if we are living in a post truth world. By extension, the Superbowl ads made me wonder if I need to start paying more attention to what is real. Is reality shifting? How do we know what is real?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus had a lot to say about reality. His life, death, and resurrection were all about shifting our reality, and that is very evident in today's Gospel reading. Last week Bishop Lucinda preached about blessings and woes from the first part of Jesus' teachings that have become known as the Sermon on the Plain. Remember the Gospel according to Matthew has the Sermon on the Mount or mountain, and the Gospel of Luke has the Sermon on the Plain or flat place. These two Sermons are related but I imagine that Jesus taught the same things over and over. Matthew recorded one instance of the teaching and a few months later Luke recorded another. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech many times, but we only remember it from in front of the Lincoln Memorial. An the same way Jesus taught the same thing over and over so that he could help us shift our reality.

Sometimes we say that reality is only defined by science. Over the last one hundred years we have had some marvelous advances due to science and the related scientific method. Our understanding of reality continues to deepen in many wonderful ways. Jesus also helped us deepen our understanding of reality, reality of who God is and what it means to be a human being. He helps us live into the beauty that God has created in each and every one of us. Jesus helps us let go of our false selves and egos and grow into our real, true self. Two thousand years ago, Jesus helped the people on the plain move to a new reality.

Jesus said, "I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them... but love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." There is some very powerful stuff here. Imagine what good things would happen in your life if you could live by these teachings of Jesus. Imagine how our world would be changed if followers of Jesus could put these words into action. Imagine it. I am guessing that we all want these words of Jesus to reframe reality, but wishing doesn't make it happen. However, wishing is a first step. And, as a second step, I want us to look at the emotions that come into play when we love our enemies.

And to that end, once again today I want to turn to Brené Brown's book "Atlas of the Heart." In this book Brown lays out the claim that most of us can only name three emotions – mad, sad, and happy. Brené Brown has written her new book to help us understand eight-eight emotions including the emotions we are going to look at today.

According to another academic and psychologist, Susan David, "Our ability to accurately recognize and label emotions with a more nuanced vocabulary can be absolutely transformative." David explains that if we don't have a sufficient emotional vocabulary it is difficult to communicate our needs and to get the support that we need from others. Those who are able to distinguish between a range of various emotions do much, much better at managing the ups and downs of ordinary life. In fact research shows that the process of labeling emotional experience is related to greater well-being. With a deeper understanding, we control our emotions, and they don't control us. Today I want to use the teachings of Jesus about loving your enemy as a leaping off point to look at the places we go when our hearts are open.

And, the most obvious open-hearted emotion is love. Love is all about connection, and I like to say that love is connection with God, others, self, and the rest of nonhuman creation. Love is about the bonds that we have. It is about healthy, intimate relationships that grow and flourish and blossom. One might say that love permeates every interaction with others, ranging from strangers and acquaintances to friends and spouses. We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection. Love is not something we give or get, it is something that we nurture and grow. It is a connection that can be cultivated between two people only when it exists within each one of them. Remember we can love others only as much as we love ourselves. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can survive these injuries only if the injuries are

acknowledged, healed, and rare. In many ways love is a mystery, and will always stay a mystery. So, love is the first emotion of an open heart.

However, when we open our hearts to love we also open them to heartbreak. Heartbreak is what happens when love is lost. Heartbreak is more than just a painful type of disappointment or failure. It hurts in a different way because heartbreak is always connected to love and belonging. My heart can only be broken by someone to whom I have given my heart. Heartbreak comes from being rejected by the one you love. The death of a loved one is also heartbreaking. And, a related heartbreak is the death of something unique, maybe even essential, in a loved one. For example, we don't want our children to stay children all their lives, but at times the loss of innocence is heartbreaking. To love with any level of intensity and honesty is to become vulnerable. But the possibility of love is worth it. Remember the brokenhearted are the bravest among us, they dared to love.

Another emotion of the open heart is trust, though trust is probably more of a cognitive assessment than an emotion. Trust is choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions. Sometimes trust is the starting point, and sometimes it grows over time. Trust can be very hard when it has been broken or betrayed. Betrayal is so painful because, at its core, it is a violation of trust. It happens in relationships in which trust is expected and assumed, so when it is violated, we are often shocked, and can struggle to believe what is happening. It can feel as if the ground beneath us has given way. It is possible to heal betrayal, but it is rare because it requires significant courage and vulnerability to hear the pain we have caused without becoming defensive. The research done by Brené Brown and her team have found that the only way back from betrayal is accountability, amends, and action. None of these things are possible without acknowledging the pain and possible trauma that we have caused someone without rationalizing or making excuses.

Love, heartbreak, trust, and betrayal are all places we go when our hearts are open. And, we have all experienced these emotions, haven't we? This is part of the human condition. This is part of our reality. Our hearts hold great beauty alongside the hurt. However, even though Jesus taught is to forgive our enemies, we don't do it very often. It can be hard to open our hearts again, after we have been wounded.

Now, in twenty-first century America we don't often point to others as our enemy. Enemy is such a strong word. But, we do keep a running list of those who have caused us heartbreak, and of those who have betrayed us. We keep adding to the list, and our hurts just keep building and building. We live in a violent destructive world because we don't know how to let go of hurts. Over and over again Jesus taught us the importance of releasing the hurts, and letting go of the pain. He does not say the

pain is OK, and he does not ask us to deny the pain, but he asks us to reach through the pain. Jesus teaches us to forgive, and to open our hearts once again to those around us. It is very hard to be on a healthy spiritual journey when our wounds keep us from being in relationship with others. We must practice opening our hearts again and again. This is a reality that Jesus teaches in his Sermon on the Plain.

However, Jesus goes a step further than teaching us this reality. Through his love for us Jesus completes his purpose on the Cross and changes the universe forever. He does this by reminding us that there is no such thing as redemptive violence. Violence doesn't save; it only destroys—in both short and long term. Jesus replaced the myth of redemptive violence with the truth of redemptive suffering. He showed us on the Cross how to hold the pain and let it transform us, rather than pass it on to others around us.

Both the lie of violence and the strategy of healing have been revealed in one compelling action on God's part. It is not that Jesus is working some magic in the sky that saves the world from sin and death. Instead, Jesus is reframing our past and our future in terms of grace. Jesus is not changing his Father's mind about us; he is changing our mind about what is real and what is not. Two thousand years ago Jesus changed what is real.

So, love your enemies. Love those who have broken your heart. Love those who have betrayed you. Embrace the reality of God's love. It is why we were created. Be brave and open your hearts to love.