

“See How They Love”

Romans 12:9-21, Ephesians 4:1-6, John 13:34,35 & 17:20-23

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Sixteen years ago theologian Miroslav Volf give a lecture on reconciliation and peace. Afterwards he was asked. "Your description of reconciliation was eloquent, but, Professor Volf, can you love a Cetnik?" He recalls: "It was the winter of 1993. For months the notorious Serbian fighters called ‘cetniks’ had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a ‘cetnik’—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? It took me a while to answer, although I immediately knew what I wanted to say—‘No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.’"

Wrestling with the question Miroslav went on to write a book revealing his struggle with this elemental and very human dilemma: the confrontation between a religion of reconciliation and the reality of racial, ethnic, and religious hatred and violence.

Sixteen years ago Los Angeles Times writer Robin Wright wrote. "Of all features of the post–Cold War world, the most consistently troubling are turning out to be tribal hatreds that divide humankind by race, faith, and nationality. . . .Containing the abuses committed in the name of ethnic or religious groups will be our foremost challenge for years to come." Among the more distressing realities of life is the persistence and even the renewal of racial, ethnic, and religious hatred—on every continent.

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Romans 12:9-21** “**Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don’t curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don’t be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don’t think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the Lord. Instead,**

“If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” Don’t let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

In another letter Paul wrote. Ephesians 4:1-6 “Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.”

Three weeks ago Brian McLaren wrote. “I was raised an evangelical Christian in America and any discussion of Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations around the world must include the phenomenon of America Islamophobia for which large sectors of evangelical Christianity in America serve as a greenhouse... In recent days, we’ve seen how irresponsible Muslim outlets used the tawdry 13-minute video created by a tiny handful of fringe Christian extremists to create a disgusting caricature of all Christians—and all Americans—in Muslim minds. But too few Americans realize how frequently American Christian media personalities in the U.S. similarly prejudice their hearers’ minds with mirror-image stereotypes of Muslims. It is hate speech. It is no different from the anti-Semitic garbage that has been all too common in Western Christian history. It is sub-Christian—beneath the dignity of anyone with a functioning moral compass.” Brian goes on to ask. “Will we press on in our current path, letting Islamophobia spread even further among us? Or will we stop, rethink and seek a more charitable approach to our Muslim neighbors? Will we realize that our Christian identity is not under assault by Muslims, or the media, or some outside group rather by our own hostility?” Our greatest threat is tolerating hate and promoting hate camouflaged as piety. We must choose. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve God and fear. We cannot serve God and hate. “The broad highway of us-them thinking and the offense-outrage-revenge reaction cycle leads to self-destruction. There is a better way, the way of Christ who, when reviled, did not revile in return, who when insulted, did not insult in return and who taught his followers to love even those who define themselves as enemies. Yes, ‘they’ the tiny minority of Muslims who turn piety into violence—have big problems of their own. But the way of Christ requires all who claim to be Christians to examine our own eyes for planks before trying to perform first aid on the eyes of others. We must admit that we have our own tiny minority whose message and methods we have not firmly, unitedly and publicly repudiated and rejected. The way of Christ is a gentle strength that transcends the vicious cycles of offense-outrage-revenge.”

What do you think of Brian’s comments? Do his words sound similar to the Apostle Paul’s words? “We are to never take revenge. Really love others. Live in

harmony with each other. Live in peace with each other. Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. We are to make every effort to keep ourselves united in the Spirit, binding ourselves together with peace."

Marcus Borg observes in his book *The Heart of Christianity* "the most visible public activity of the Jesus Movement was its inclusive meal practice. Jesus, a Jew, ate with people from other religions, with people with no belief in God, with people on the other side of the political issues, with the oppressors, scoundrels, cheats and all sorts of sinners. Jesus ate with rich and poor, elite and outcast, male and female and with people from different races and cultures. Marcus says, "It was a political act that subverted the social boundaries of his day."

Is Jesus calling us to become known for subverting the boundaries that separate people? Is Jesus calling us to include rather than exclude, unite rather than divide? Is Jesus calling us to speak up whenever someone starts using "us" "them" language in generational comparisons, in politics, in race, in faith, in any comparison, to point out our unity in God, our call to live in harmony? Is Jesus calling us to speak up every time a person or group is misunderstood, judged, rejected and defamed? Is Jesus calling us to let go of our selfishness and serve for the good of the community? Is Jesus calling us to stop fighting the worship wars, clap or no clap, short or long sermon, bright lighting or low lighting, gluten free bread or gluten full bread, traditional hymns or praise music, screens or bulletin, mega church or family church, liberal or conservative, to come together in love of all and respect for all forms of worship. Are we to celebrate how each of us is unique, how each of us likes to worship in a different way, yet find a way to come together in harmony in God? Is Jesus calling us to love everyone, to be gracious hosts, to make sure everyone has a spot at the table?

Jesus taught, modeled, and commanded extravagant love and boundless grace. Jesus said. **John 13:34-35 "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."** On the last night, Jesus was to physically be on earth with the disciples, Jesus washed their feet, gave them the bread and cup, commanded them to love and prayed for their unity. Jesus prayed **John 17:20-23 "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. "I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me."**

For a brief time the early Christians lived out loving unity so much so that a historian wrote about the Christian movement. "See how they love one another." How sad that today people outside the church often say that it is our infighting, division and failure to love one another that keeps them from interest in joining a church and keeps

them from wanting to know God. Brennan Manning says, “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny God by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”

The Apostle Paul saw the lack of love and negative evangelism of our fighting just two decades after Jesus resurrection. In response he wrote. **Ephesians 4:1 & 3 "I beg you, make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."**

Princeton's Beverly Gaventa says, "We're not talking about feel-good unity—the more we get together and share our stories, the better we'll feel—unity. In fact, I've been part of enough of those well-intentioned efforts to have discovered that when you really get to know some people you discover that you like them even less. We're talking about a unity purchased at a price and then given to us by Jesus Christ. I love the way Auburn Seminary President Barbara Wheeler puts it." "The peace of Christ is not a sentimental blanket in which we hide and smother our differences. It is a genuine reconciliation." We are joined in Christ, Wheeler says, with those with whom we have little in common. The love of God in Jesus Christ "breaks down the barriers that divide, making people who can't stand each other fellow citizens and members of the same household of God—because Christ died for us and for all of them"

Hell, is not being able to love someone. There is a lot of hell on earth, for there are a lot of people who are unable to love. Some are not able to love at all, some are not able to love certain people, some are not able to love their enemies, and some are not able to love themselves.

World Communion Sunday is a yearning for heaven, a yearning for transformation, a yearning to love, a yearning for community, a yearning for communion with God and all people. We are not capable of perfect love for all people. However God is eager to enable us to love. God gives us free will. God will not force us to love, however, if we desire to love, then God will transform us, renew us, and enable us to love. God enables us to see the opportunities instead of the limitations. God enables us to cooperate instead of hating. The world is a messy place. By partnering with our redeeming God we will then be able to enjoy worldwide unity and peace.

World Communion Sunday reminds us that there is unity and oneness in God, that the Creator's will is for peace, and that God our loving parent is always working in and through the tragic human events of history to bring all God's children home together at one big table.

World Communion Sunday is a mystery. When we willingly partake of God's spiritual nourishment and desire to live like Christ, we are transformed. Little by little we become bolder and bolder in our love. We are nourished with forgiveness to forgive. We are fed to feed others. We are reconciled with God to reconcile with everyone. We become a new person. God will do the transforming but we need to will it.

Decades ago, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with Europe, Japan and Pearl Harbor in ruins, and the human race staggering, almost stunned by its capacity for violence and destruction. Christians all over the world came together to find a way to speak a prophetic and healing word: a word that would affirm the oneness of the human race, the precious gift of every human life, and also a word that might translate religious beliefs into the politics of peace. They came up with World Communion Sunday, on the first Sunday of October; Christians all around the world join hands across barriers of race, belief and nationality. We gather in the name of God to celebrate our unity and have hope that God will heal all our divisions and bring us all back together.

I believe in the fullness of time, by God's love and grace, God will bring everyone together in harmonious unity. I believe we help usher in that time when we come to the Lord's table eager to have our hate and fear washed away, eager to have God enable us to love everyone. I believe God is working to reunite us all with everyone, to bring together all God's separated children.

What do you believe? What do you will? Do you desire to love everyone? How will you come to the table on this World Communion Sunday? Amen