

Sermon for Epiphany VII A 2017

“You have heard that it was 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, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” - Matthew 5

We live in a crisis of faith, in which the fastest-growing identifiable religious group is the group called the NONES,

those who indicate no attachment to any religious tradition or community when asked by pollsters.

They may be believers of some sort, to be sure, and they may be morally excellent people, perhaps more so than some institutionally-connected religious people.

But they have distanced themselves from the community of faith, from others in it,

and whatever spiritual practice they have is pursued on their own, by their own logic and on their own schedule.

I have talked with more than one person over the years leaving the church after some time in it and have heard a variety of reasons for it.

Some cannot bear the hypocrisy (endemic in every human community), the occasional dysfunction (part of life),

or changes in theology or interpretation (which happen in every age).

More significantly to me, many keep or make a distance from the church due to a finely-tuned sense of tragedy and justice.

They wonder why the young get sick, why the reckless and thoughtless survive, and why so many terrible things happen in the world.

Thinking on these things may lead to doubt about the efficacy of prayer, the worthiness of God, and the usefulness of life in faith and in a faith community.

Such a path can lead into the solitary and looser spiritual life more and more people are claiming.

Who can blame them?

Life indeed is hard and there are tragedies and the ultimate reasons that things happen are shrouded in mystery.

I bear such things, we bear such things, in faith, with a sense of God’s providential purposes being ultimately borne out.

Some look at the same evidence and decide that the life of faith isn’t worth it,

doesn’t explain enough,

doesn’t make sense of their experience,

and they move on or never come in.

I regret it and yet am moved to ask the same questions.
I cannot entirely explain why I have faith in the face of the same data.
I'm thankful that I do.

If they did come in, however, they would hear that Jesus agreed with them.
God, he said in the Great Instruction, "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."
At least at the level of basic providential care, of sun and rain, God cares alike for the evil and the good.
Two farmers, neighbors in the same district, one a cheater, extortionist, and adulterer;
the other a model of purity and charity;
on them alike the sun shines and the rain falls.
Their crops come in in equal measures;
their farms thrive or struggle, we imagine, at the same pace.
God does not withhold the goodness of the creation from those who do wrong;
God does not necessarily bless the morally excellent with some extra dose of the good things of this world.
Jesus knew it and was not afraid to admit it.

The Lord might want us to understand something about the mercy of God here,
that God's favor not retrained by our disobedience,
that God's strong will to love is not turned even by our evil.
You know how hard it is to escape the sun's rays in summer in South Carolina;
you know how soaked you can be if caught in a spring shower without your umbrella and rain jacket.
The good and loving will of God is like that;
it is impossible to avoid and finds even those who devote themselves to avoiding it by their deeds.

So those who abandon the life of faith because of their sense of justice, because they see the flourishing of the wicked and the suffering of the innocent risk making a grave mistake.
They wish for a God less generous, a God less merciful,
a God more demanding of holiness, a God quicker to punish the obviously wicked.
I wish for such a God as well, sometimes, when life does not go my way
or when I think of the tyrants under whom too many suffer.
I do not wish for such a God, however, when I think on my own sins.
My own failures lead me to ponder a God who lets the rain and sun of his love find even me.

We who endure in the household of faith, in the Body of Christ mean to stand on generous ground,
to love even enemies and those who do evil,
to remember that we stand on the same ground as they do,

under the same sun, in the same rain;
even that sometimes we are they.

We love our unrighteous enemies because God loves them,
and in our love for the unrighteous we admit that we are unrighteous,
in our love for our enemies we admit that others see us as their enemies.

From such a consciousness we can make the only authentic claim on God's mercy that the
Gospel allows.

That we deserve God's mercy as much as they do, because it is so freely given in the death and
Resurrection of Christ.