GAME-CHANGING COMMITMENT; GENESIS 45:3-11, 15; LUKE 6:27-38; 2-24-19; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I was watching Stephen Colbert the other night. He appeals because of his quick, intelligent, playful, if at times gallows, humor he brings to the current political climate.

It's generally better to laugh than to cry. Given the ongoing national discussion of everything from Russian collusion to a climate 'scientist' unearthed by the Trump Administration last week who actually says that we need more CO2 in the atmosphere – I find a good belly laugh more cathartic and less depressing than weeping for the future of the nation and planet.

Colbert who has perfected fast-paced late night television with sprint like segments from the show's quick opening parody of the day's events out of Washington to the image of a taxi driving through Times Square and those ten story portraits of the evening's guests to Colbert's entrance running onto the set, giving everyone in the first row a "high five" dashing to center stage to begin the evening monologue.

The parody portion last Friday was Kermit the Frog from Sesame Street walking through a forest singing, "It's hard to be green." He meant, of course, not his own green body but green as in environmentally clean and conscious.

The lyrics in his soft, high-pitched voice were endearing. Kermit sang about being blamed by fake news to be the organizer of hit squads for cattle – since we know that beef cattle are not only a notoriously inefficient use of farmland but that the methane gas their manure produces is a serious contributor to climate change and global warming. It's hard to be green, Kermit crooned between excerpts from Fox News and clips of the President attacking the credibility of climate science and impending ecological disaster.

Why is Kermit singing this song? It is a lament to be sure. *But it's just the right thing to do.* The *right cause* to be committed to despite growing opposition from climate deniers who now have a friend in the White House. But we also have to recognize our own lethargic pace of change and unwillingness to imagine coastal cities submerged and whole temperate zones made lethally hot.

In today's lesson from Luke, Jesus is preaching his Sermon on the Plain – it is similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and today's portion sounds a lot like Matthew.

"Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on the cheek turn to them the other also, go the extra mile, give the shirt off your back to anyone who needs it" then he sums it all up with the rule common to every major religion: ***do unto others as you would have them do unto you.***"

These are Jesus' "it's hard to be green" admonitions. He calls us to such behavior because flawed and recalcitrant as we are God shows mercy to us, loves us, treats us with dignity. Why would God do that? Because we are made in God's image and, therefore, of inestimable worth in God's eyes – cherished and beloved, if infuriating at times.

The implication of these exhortations is that love is a decision not a feeling. *Love* your enemy, *do good* to those who hate you, *bless* those who curse you, *pray for* those who mistreat you. Those are *decisions;* not feelings. They are *choices* to conduct ourselves in specific ways.

> An enemy is by definition someone whom you do not love but hate; so to love an enemy means that they are no longer your enemy. Even to say a half-hearted prayer for one you consider your nemesis is to change the relationship. There is a crack in the armor, a chink in the defense.
>
> > I've been trying an experiment. I've been praying for Donald J. Trump and his administration every morning. At first it felt inauthentic. Fake. Ridiculous. But over time it has taken on a genuine focus of concern that the president's best side, his humanity will find expression in his personal relationships and policies as well as for all of those in his administration that they may discover the image of God within them.

I say that Jesus calls us to this kind of behavior because it is how God behaves. Maybe you're thinking, "Now he's holding us to the standard of God's behavior?!" Yes, I am. Rather, Jesus is. And that amazing story of Joseph forgiving his brothers today.

> Jesus holds us to godly standards because you and I are like God, we are not God *but we are like God*; which is how God made us – in his image. This is the great contribution of the Abrahamic faith traditions to the world. Once another human being is regarded as made in God's image and has the capacity to be merciful, loving and forgiving – it becomes a moral violation to treat that person as anything less or in any way less than dignified. To do so is to lower ourselves, to be less than the image of God in which we are made.
>
> > I am not suggesting that sins are to be ignored; that justice is to go unrequited. But we are, according to Luke and Jesus today, to hold ourselves and one another to higher standards than mere justice. We are to hold ourselves to the standards of love and mercy; the same love and mercy with which God regards and treats us.

To say that this was in the ancient world a radical idea – that humans are to be held to godly standards, to love's standards – would be like saying the invention of the wheel was important.

> If we think of the world into which Jesus introduced this notion – a world of violence in which those in power, the Romans, regarded anyone other than Roman as a lesser human and, therefore, able to be treated as slave or meat for sport at the Colosseum or who could be victimized and mistreated by any king or person of nobility – like Crazy King Herod beheading John – if we think of that world or our own nuclear-tipped, gun-besotted, male-dominated world we might wonder how this unheard of regard for and treatment of others ever saw the light of day.
>
> > But not only did it see the light of day, it captured the hearts of Jesus' followers and many hearts since because it speaks to what is deepest in us and our truest identity. Despite tribal customs of revenge and violent codes of honor, Jesus' message took root.

It is no exaggeration to say that in 1215 a ruthless British king and the customary human abuses he was, by tradition, entitled to, when confronted by representatives of the church, was asked to sign an agreement that would bring peace to the land that would be called the Great Charter of Liberties or the Magna Charta;

it is no exaggeration to say that this landmark document that opened the way for all future treaties recognizing human rights, has its genesis in Jesus' admonition to "love our enemies" – and the Christian ethic of love of which Jesus' sermon from Luke is a pillar.

Add to it the English Act of Habeas Corpus of 1679 which gave any person held by the state the right to a trial if that person deemed his incarceration unwarranted; or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 during the French Revolution; or the American Bill of Rights adopted in 1791 – the lineage of these civilizing treaties and their protections can be traced to what was in the ancient world and is in our world – a radical, unheard of standard of conduct – "to love your enemies."

One wonders what a world without such a high standard of individual and collective behavior might look like. In fact, we don't have to wonder. We see it when human greed, gluttony, envy, wrath, sloth, lust, and pride overtake a marriage or family, a church or school, a business, or the leaders of any institution or nation.

We see and hear the vision for such a world that white supremacists and nationalists are calling for. The Holocaust which murdered over six million Jews, half of them before 1943, was not so long ago; Stalin's reign of terror that starved and shot similar multitudes of people occurred at the same time.

If ever there was a good time since World War II to reclaim our Christian ethic of love it is now. Reinhold Niebuhr said in the 1950s that the most we can hope for among groups of people – nations – is justice because nations are incapable as collectives of people to express personal virtues like love. When Jesus preaches today "love your enemies" he is not preaching national policy but personal conduct. To the extent that individuals strive to live by that ethic in day to day relationships whole communities, even nations, can be changed.

The very core of our faith – the image of God in which every human being is made – is challenged by the notion that a nation or a race are superior. Here's a hunch: I suspect the proponents of that philosophy experienced little of what Jesus was calling for today, little mercy or forgiveness or love when they were children.

This past week I had the honor of participating in a funeral service of a former ENERGY tutor who happened to be a member of Temple Beth Zion. I got to know Fred when he came here to tutor kids after school; he was a brilliant pianist and could make music on that old broken down upright in the lower level; kids and adults would gather around to hear him play.

Fred was amazing: dentist, racecar driver, sharp shooter, organic gardener, builder of airplanes and pilot and more. But what made him remarkable is that he consistently lived by the rule of 'do unto to others.'

His childhood was not easy, in fact, it was extraordinarily difficult. The hardships he faced and lived through in his childhood enabled him to be acutely aware of the pain and joy, the hope and despair of children and it instilled in him a life long commitment to serve kids professionally and as a volunteer.

He knew that love is stronger than death, and that hope is the best antidote to fear and depression. His legacy was creating beauty and joy first in his own life then in the lives of others – especially marginalized children – who least expected such goodness to visit them.

What sets humans apart from the created order is our capacity for virtue – for what Webster calls "general moral excellence." And what makes a virtuous person is the crucible of life; choosing to live virtuously in the face of difficulty and hardship, even loving and forgiving those we consider adversaries or enemies. The choice to be virtuous when life is good and all is well is different than the choice to be virtuous when you have experienced injustice or unkindness.

Such conduct does not promise wealth, nor will it necessarily lead to fame. But it does have the capacity to transform you and me and our most difficult relationships, from train wrecks and disasters into moments of healing, peace and serenity.

I still watch Colbert and enjoy much of his show – some of the interviews are particularly good. But I am less impressed with the opening monologue that often denigrates other people; politicians in particular for whom I have little admiration but an increasing capacity, it seems, to love.

It's hard to be green – to face the resistance and ridicule; but what better cause to be called a fool for? And it's hard to love your enemies, to do unto them as you would have them do unto you; but it's not impossible, nor are there many other options so clearly needed for our time. Amen.