

Real Tension and Surreal Love
Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
II Lent C; February 28, 2010
Scott Richardson +

*Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.*

I grew up in an athletic household. My brothers and I participated in many sports, beginning when we were young and continuing through our college years. We were taught to compete, vie, contend. And, from the very beginning, our coaches made an effort to teach us to be good sports, win or lose – when the game was over we were to shake hands, congratulate our opponents on their skill and effort, and wish them well.

Our lessons today remind us that the people of the Bible also learned to compete, vie, and contend, but they weren't necessarily good sports when things wound down. In fact, they burned with unremitting hatred for their opponents. There's a reason for that – the stakes were far higher back then. In our youth we might have been contending for a plastic trophy; in their day they were contending for life and limb.

Israel was overwhelmed again and again by those who visited grievous harm upon them – Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans, most especially. When their foes traveled across the landscape the outcome could be catastrophic – mayhem, chaos, rampage, pillaging, destroying crops, laying waste, slaughter, enslavement. Because the threat was so dire, the Israelites constantly looked to one another and to God for protection.

And because that was true, both raw hatred and unalloyed faith found their way into our sacred text. We hear it in several verses from Psalm 27 that immediately precede those you just heard chanted: When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, it was they, my foes and my adversaries, who stumbled and fell. Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid; and though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him... In the day of trouble he shall keep me safe in his shelter; he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling and set me high upon a rock.

It's hard for us, I think, to catch the depth of feeling in a psalm like this. Our life in America is magnificently secure, especially in comparison to others in the world today and to those who lived in ancient times. The horror of 9/11 gave us a glimpse into their reality but it wasn't sustained in the same manner, praise God. And we're not powerless in the same way the Israelites were – they swagger a bit in the Bible but they were, truth be told, a pipsqueak nation in a region of

behemoths. Hence their prayerful reliance on God's might – their actual military might was, for the most part, insufficient.

So, in regard to their external enemies, the Israelites contend but they do so verbally – calling on their Deliverer to release them from threat and destruction. They also contend inwardly – they tussle with God from time to time and with one another, with other members of their tribe, nation, or cult. Paul, for instance, vocally denounces those who don't share his vision and ethic: their end is destruction; their god is the belly; they glory in their shame. Jesus has harsh words for King Herod (that rat) and for those who historically resist the prophetic message: Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not.

Our lessons today are full of contention, conflict, competing visions. We're talking now about real anger, real fear, real dread, real grief. And it's in this all-too-real context that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, makes the most demanding claim – love your enemies, he says; pray for those who persecute you.

It's hard to heed those words today, even in the midst of great comfort and security. Imagine hearing those words two thousand years ago, with the Roman boot on your neck and the dagger pricking your back. Love your enemies. Love those who oppress you. Love the extortionist, the traitor, the collaborator. Love those who burn your fields. Love those who enslave your children. Love those who poison your well. Love those who destroy your temple. Love those who put you in a pen with a hungry lion, simply for their amusement, their entertainment. Love them and pray for them. Jesus then went on to show what that kind of love looks like in real time – praying on the cross for those who, just moments before, drove spikes through his wrists and ankles.

So the Bible is very real in its depiction of human tension and almost surreal in the proposed response to it – uncompromising love. How can we hear both sides of that? And what do we do with it? The truth is, we generally don't do much. Because the gap between the cause (chronic conflict) and the cure (absolute love) is so huge, we try to shrink it down to size. We come near our enemies with appropriate caution and might, on a really good day, crack off a tepid prayer on their behalf - Lord, please turn the heart of Osama bin Laden. Amen. That's about all most of us can pull off.

But, maybe, we could also try expanding our parameters of love by focusing on challenges closer to home. If praying for those who persecute you is too much, then pray for those who mildly irritate you. Pray for the dog down the street who barks too much. Pray for the owner, too. Pray for your colleague who persistently gets under your skin. Pray for the guy on the freeway weaving in and out of traffic. Pray for the gossip, the sneak, the braggart, the buffoon. Just

pray in a spirit of love and practice the way of Christ. Think of yourself as a sophomore in God's College of Holy Affection who aspires toward a PhD. Progress is enough for now, perfection will come later.

And, believing that, let me here conclude with a story that shows what our end could look like if we practice the prayerful love of Christ every day, even in small ways, quietly, privately. This comes to us from the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, those fourth century mystics and God-lovers who hailed from the same region that produced our passion-filled scriptures. It's about a hermit who practiced loving prayer for so long that he was, in the end, divinely apathetic, benignly indifferent to anger, hostility, and hatred, full of charity in every sense of that word. Here's the story:

Abbot Anastasius had a book written on very fine parchment. It had in it both the Old and New Testaments in full. A certain brother came to visit him. Seeing the book, he made off with it. The abbot did not send after him to inquire about it for fear that the brother might add perjury to theft. The brother tried to sell the book for a fraction of its value. Before completing the deal, the buyer privately took the book to Anastasius to assess its worth. The abbot assured the buyer that the tome was indeed a fine book and worth all of the asking price, perhaps more.

The buyer then returned to the brother and, offering the money, reported on his conversation with Anastasius. The brother asked, "Was that all he said? Did he make any other remarks?" The buyer said no. The brother refused to sell the book. He hastened back to Anastasius. Weeping, he begged him to take back his book. The abbot refused, offering it to the brother as a present. The brother remained with Anastasius for the rest of his life.