



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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**✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN. ✠**

The thing that separates the Christian faith from all of the other world religions is its unique emphasis on the word “love.” Scripture teaches us that it’s not simply a very good thing to love our fellow men, but that it is an absolute necessity for us to do so. Indeed, God tells us that the only acceptable way for us to demonstrate our love for him is to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Folks familiar with the New Testament shouldn’t find this overwhelming emphasis on love altogether surprising. It is the very nature of God, himself. As St. John in today’s communion Epistle points love is “of God” and everyone who loves is born of God because God, himself, ***IS*** love.

Today’s Communion Gospel – St Luke’s account of Jesus’ frightening parable of a rich man called Dives and Lazarus the beggar who lay at his gate – explains what God expects of us and the terrible consequences that await us if we fail to make the effort.

If the parable of Dives and Lazarus demonstrates one thing it is that loving our fellows is not merely a matter of doing them no harm. Loving them in God’s book demands action. Dives

didn’t end up in hell because he did Lazarus any harm. Far from doing him harm, Lazarus lived on Dives’ charity. He was fed on the leftovers from Dives’ table. What with Dives being rich and self indulgent, his leftovers were doubtless very tasty and quite nourishing.

The frightening thing about the parable is that Dives ended up in hell not because he did Lazarus harm, but because he really didn’t care about him one way or the other. He was perfectly happy to give Lazarus his cast off clothing and the food he and his family couldn’t eat, but he didn’t go out of his way to help him.

If history demonstrates anything, it is that love is the most powerful force on earth. Love has transformed the world in which we live – and, if we continue to practice what we preach, it will continue to do so. The Christian obligation to love our neighbors as we love ourselves has given us our unique understanding of the value of the individual – that each and everyone of us has been endowed by our creator with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The value we place on the individual has freed the human spirit and enabled it to

achieve extraordinary things for the benefit of all mankind. It is no accident that just about every advance in terms of human progress – both in the sphere of ideas and the realm of technology originated in what used be called Christendom.

But more than that, this Christian obligation to love our fellow human beings has enabled ordinary people to resist and, indeed, defeat the most powerful forces the world, the flesh and the devil has thrown at them. It has given them the courage to risk death to fight disease. It has sustained prisoners in concentration camps and the Gulag. It has inspired people to put their own lives on the line in the fight against oppression wherever it is encountered.

One of the most dogged of all was the Prophet Jeremiah, subject of the first lesson at today's Morning Office. Jeremiah is not a name that immediately springs to mind at mention of the word "loving." In human terms at least, he was probably Israel's least successful prophet. All he had to show for 40 years of preaching was one solitary convert: Baruch, his secretary.

Jeremiah's problem was not a lack of eloquence. His book demonstrates he was extraordinarily articulate. Nor did he lack a flair for public relations. He was genius at dreaming up wild publicity stunts to get his name in the papers. The trouble was people didn't much care for his message.

All of his career, Jeremiah was locked in bitter – sometimes violent – competition with his fellow prophets. You get an idea of ugly tenor of the debate the first lesson appointed for today's Office of Morning Prayer:

"Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I against them that prophesy false dreams . . . and

cause my people to err by their lies."

This might not sound loving, but, then, there is nothing "loving" about "enabling" self-destructive behavior. Jeremiah was a talented man. He could have leapt on the bandwagon and made a packet. But his love for God and his neighbors gave him the spiritual strength to press on with a seemingly hopeless struggle when lesser men would have thrown in the towel.

Jeremiah was on the losing side of a battle of ideas that has been going on since the very beginning of time – an intellectual war between two schools of thought. One aims to establish a perfectly just and equal human society on earth. The other is inspired by the vision of human society that conforms God's idea of the perfect society; a vision enunciated in Holy Scripture.

The same battle is taking place in America today – in our schools, in our universities, in our cultural institutions, in government, in the media and, just as in Jeremiah's day, in our churches. And, as in Jeremiah's day, the folks who are trying to remake society according to human concepts of perfection seem to have the upper hand.

The bad news is that the consequence of Jeremiah's defeat in the battle of ideas was the total destruction of Jerusalem. Judah's politicians – urged on by the false prophets – backed the wrong horse in Egypt's struggle with the newly-emerged Babylonian Empire.

The good news is that the ultimate victor in the war was Jeremiah. While the false prophets won the allegiance of politicians who brought about Judah's destruction, Jeremiah won the hearts and minds of the generation that rebuilt Jerusalem a mere 70 years later. And it is his godly vision of godly that has shaped Jewish life right down to today. *AMEN.*