



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity - July 5th, 2015

*"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;  
That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."*

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

To say that Jesus made a career out of upsetting the status quo would be an understatement of epic proportions. The Gospels are full of examples of Jesus turning contemporary conventions upside down, and of upsetting social mores, and just generally shaking things up. But rarely (if ever) will you find a greater example of that than in today's Gospel reading in Matthew.

The fact is, open and zealous hatred of one's enemies made as much sense to the people of first century Judea as it does to us now. Now, the Torah did not command that one should hate one's enemies; that's why Jesus here says "*you have heard it said,*" in lieu of "*it is written*" or *somesuch*. In fact, the Torah suggests very early on that charity towards one's enemies is a rather good idea - Exodus 23:4 prefigures the words of Jesus here in Matthew when it says, "*If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.*" But as we see time and time again, God's people often forget or just outright disregard the challenging parts of following Him, and by the time Jesus was preaching, hatred of enemies was considered perfectly acceptable and not at all contrary to true religion.

So what is the purpose of loving one's enemies, and why is Jesus making such a startling and bold declaration now? The first purpose is clearly outlined right after the command to love - "*That ye may be the*

*children of your Father which is in heaven.*" If you were here on Trinity Sunday, you heard Fr. Hawtin's sermon on the nature of the Holy Trinity; that is, when we say "God is love," we aren't merely saying that "God loves," but that God *is* love. How else could three persons share one divine nature than to exist in perfect, charitable, uncompromising love? There is no disunity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and it is **that** love that we are called to emulate. We are called to strive to emulate a love that is perfect and charitable in every way, a love that God shows in His divine nature, if we ourselves are to truly be the children of God.

That use of the word "*children*" here gives us some insight into Jesus' purpose as well. Jesus calls God "Father" **seventeen times** in the Sermon on the Mount; do you suppose that's an accident, or somehow without an explicit purpose? He is trying to paint a picture for us that allows us to see ourselves as God's children so that we can grasp the enormity of God's love for us. Jesus knows that no other picture will convey the depth and breadth of God's love than to hope that we understand that God loves us all as dearly and as kindly as we love our own children. "Oh no, Fr. Michael," you might be thinking, "not us all. He loves me because I go to church every Sunday and I tithe or at least strongly consider tithing and I go to monthly meetings of The League Of Responsible Citizens ... sometimes. But certainly you can't mean my neighbor with all the

repellent political bumper stickers on his car that *clearly* indicate he's not a Christian. Or the blighter down the street who always yells at my children. Or the wiccan next door whose house always smells like weird incense. Those people aren't God's children, as I'm pretty sure they've rejected God."

Don't be ashamed to admit it; we've all suffered that kind of lack of charity in our hearts before, myself included. But **do** think about it for a second. If you have children above the age of two or three, then you've no doubt heard their own bold declarations that you're the worst parent ever and that they don't love you any more. Did those declarations sever the relationship? Did they actually stop functionally being your children during the temper tantrum? Or did you look at them with the look that only parents possess; the look of patient pity that knows your child will be returning, perhaps in tears, for comfort?

That brings us to the other great purpose in loving our enemies - those enemies of ours are the children of God. My boys were playing Nintendo the other day, and one of them apparently did something which caused the other to lose. The latter child's course of action was to turn and squarely punch the former in the arm so hard that he fell over. Thus began an argument between the two of them that ended in me removing Nintendo from the equation for a couple of days. But in that moment, these two darling boys who both show a great propensity for charity to each other and to their sister, had become mortal enemies. And while they were both wrong to a degree, I could no sooner stop loving one than the other, and I was grieved that they both decided they were no longer brothers and that they "hated" each other. That's how God views us, as His children - and that is why our hatred for our enemies is as much anathema to God as it is when we hear our own children profess their hatred for one another.

The grand difference of course is that we have accepted a call to repentance and forgiveness and grace that those who would persecute us have not. And even if these enemies are not enemies of the faith, but God forbid, enemies *within* the faith, then we have at least still been given a greater measure of faith and gracious behaviour than they who would declare themselves our enemy. Yet that still doesn't give us a justification for hatred of anybody, regardless of their hatred of us, or of what we may perceive, real or imagined, to be their hatred of

God. The French have a phrase for this - "noblesse oblige," defined as the "inferred responsibility of privileged people to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged." Jesus Himself says this in a much more pointed way in Luke - "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."

We have been given a greater measure, and the onus is on us to show greater kindness, greater forgiveness, and greater grace to those who cannot or will not show the same to us. We have been given a gift we do not deserve - the redemption of our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - how can we in turn deny grace and forgiveness to other people who are equally undeserving?

Please, don't mistake this as an endorsement of just ignoring wrongs, or of not correcting injustice when you see it, or of not helping a brother or sister in Christ to see sin in their lives. To do so would be entirely against our call to be stewards of this world, and living witnesses to the faith once delivered. By all means, stand strong in the faith, and never waiver in what you know to be holy and true and conforming to God's word. Just remember that we don't win hearts or correct sin with hatred or ugly behaviour, but with love, charity, and kindness.

Jesus never asks us to do that which He Himself would not do. He naturally knew this love for enemies would be very difficult for us to understand or follow, because it's very much counter to our human nature. That's why when He was being crucified, he cried "Father forgive them, they know not what they do;" He wanted us to understand that forgiveness starts at the cross - and if we are to truly be *children of God* and disciples of Jesus Christ, we must forgive and love, right up until the very end, even at the cost of our lives.

***In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen***