

WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE –
WITH CHARITY FOR ALL

I am not among the many thoughtless folk who believe that a Minister should practice what he preaches. Today's sermon title calls forth such a reminder. I do have hope and faith toward a great many things that I am not yet personally able to achieve or accomplish. I appreciate and want to serve "the church" because we can gather as God's children to honor and live toward things that we do not yet perfectly emulate.

Over the years, for instance, I have tried with earnest longing to live according to the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I have never made it past noon on any single day without realizing that I have already fallen short of one or another of the precepts in that sermon. I do not blame the sermon. I think Jesus was lining out the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that are necessary to Life in the Kingdom of Heaven. In theory I can see how necessary such attitudes and approaches really are. But if I myself try to live with such attitudes and approaches in real life, it only shows me how far from the Kingdom I still am in my own spiritual development. I even think Jesus preached this sermon so that any of us who really listened would know how great our need for God is – and how much we still need a Savior.

Abraham Lincoln, however much we might respect and revere him, was not Jesus. But some of us are convinced that Lincoln was far more religious than an age of religious jaundice wants to admit. His famous comment – "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go" – caps it. More and more, Lincoln's life took on a Garden of Gethsemane flavor. More and more, Lincoln turned to God for strength and guidance as the horror of the Civil War unfolded around him, and as he felt increasingly trapped in realities from which there was no safe or happy escape.

Just for perspective, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Six months later (July 1, 1863) 51,000 soldiers fell (dead or wounded) in three days of fighting at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. (28,000 Confederate; 23,000 Union.) It would be the last major effort of the Confederate forces to invade the North. A gathering to dedicate a portion of the battlefield as a cemetery for soldiers who had fallen there, from both the North and the South, was held on November 19, 1863.

Edward Everett, the most famous orator of his time, spoke for two hours and held the place spellbound. Afterward, Lincoln spoke for a little over two minutes. But it was not “off the cuff,” as many want to imagine. Lincoln wrote five versions of his Gettysburg Address – the first one in Washington before he even left to go to Gettysburg. Lincoln was neither casual nor careless about what had happened at Gettysburg.

One year plus four and a half months later, Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865). It was seven minutes long (706 words, to the 272 words of the Gettysburg Address). In many ways it was more of a sermon than a political speech. Nearly half of the speech invokes references to God or to the Scriptures. Lincoln seems to have realized that the battle to preserve the Union and to free the slaves had become so egregious that only God could make sense out of it, or bring healing in its wake.

With malice toward none; with charity for all;
with firmness in the right,
as God gives us to see the right,
let us strive on to finish the work we are in;
to bind up the nation’s wounds;
to care for him who shall have borne the battle,
and for his widow, and his orphan –
to do all which may achieve and cherish
a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves,
and with all nations.

– closing lines of Lincoln’s
Second Inaugural Address

It is hard to remember that very little had been resolved at this point. The Civil War was not yet over. It would be thirty-six days after this speech before Lee would surrender at the Appomattox Court House. Many must still die. Forty-one days after this speech, Lincoln would be dead – shot by John Wilkes Booth.

Is it ever right to compare our tiny little problems with the major events of the heroes and circumstances of our heritage? I do it all the time, of course. There is no way I can be a follower of Jesus if I do not see His life as relevant to my own. If His life does not reveal principles and purposes and the realities of the spiritual realms – and if they do not become applicable to my own tiny efforts in my own tiny circumstances – then I cannot discover any connections between my Savior’s life and my own.

It is why I so resent the theology behind the Virgin Birth stories. Some of the imagery is fun to play with, but if the gap between Jesus' identity and my own gets too great, then following Him is no longer possible. That's okay with some people. They are happy for Jesus to be divine, and for Jesus to save them from afar and by mystery and miracle that they have nothing directly to do with. But my awareness of the relationship and my gratitude for the love get too great. I cannot keep from responding in some way. Jesus does save me, but part of it is by the way He calls me into New Life, into New Identity, into New Purpose. Peter and Andrew and John and Paul were not just tolling their beads and waiting for death to take them to another realm where they would suddenly morph into perfection. Part of what makes it possible to endure this broken world and all the tragedy and heartbreak going on here is the fact that a New Life is possible for Jesus' followers because He is with us, even in the here and now.

We have not come through a Civil War here in this church. Or have we? There is no battlefield strewn with our dead. We do not live with the wounded who have come back to our villages from the battlefield, missing arms or legs or eyes or hands. Our streets are lined with high-end automobiles, and the beaches and walkways are often filled with Greek-like gods and goddesses. If we paid attention to only the surface of life and the outer show of the society around us, we might go away thinking that everything in this area of Orange County is idyllic and beautiful, though perhaps a tad shallow and pointless at times.

Why then do I keep feeling the marks of a war zone under the surface? Why does it sometimes seem like there are many wounds that still need to be healed? How is it that I run into friends that I love and who still love me, but they no longer love each other like they did when I was here before? Why is it that I sometimes get the feeling that some of us walk around here like we are stepping through a minefield? Maybe most of the mines have been removed or defused, but you can never tell for sure when you might step on another live one. And can it be my imagination that from time to time I catch a facial expression or a tone of sadness in some comment – or even the trace of tears – before it is all quickly covered up?

It is a broken world. This is not Heaven. If you are well-adjusted here, you are really sick. Many times we simply have to remember the presence of our Lord, and keep moving on in the directions and for the purposes that we have come to believe Jesus is calling us into. Not everything gets resolved here. We are not always vindicated here.

But we *are* loved and forgiven and strengthened and guided. It is enough for now. We are followers and servants of the Resurrected One, and that brings light and joy back into our lives.

Nevertheless, there are principles and purposes to our WAY that we pay attention to, or we cannot stay on this WAY. Some of our wounds need to be healed, and it is not faithful to live with wounds that our Lord wants to heal.

So, there are a couple of things that we have already alluded to lightly but which need to come front and center for all of us who are willing to hear and live by the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

What goes wrong in the church? I don't mean sometimes; I mean in every church and always and all along the way? I have been a Pastor in nine churches – ten if you count this one twice. Most of the time – despite flaws, mistakes, heartache, bickering, recalcitrance, and arguments – it has been a privilege and a joy to be a Pastor. I have not found God's people to be perfect. But I have found them to be wonderful in many ways, often inspiring in their courage and devotion, and sometimes surprising in their faithfulness and commitment. Frequently they are loving and grateful people in ways that would totally surprise those who seem convinced from afar that the church is full of hypocrites.

It is nevertheless true that what causes the most trouble and cuts the most power in every church I have ever known are broken relationships. Sometimes if a relationship breaks, it gets so uncomfortable for those involved that one or both parties leave the church. More often a rift in a relationship will leave people in an uncomfortable truce. Often both parties try to minimize the damage, but the lack of trust and the wounds that are left from the breach go on taking their toll. How could this surprise us? Sin is separation. Sin is alienation. These are not just words we leave lying around in some vague creed or statement of faith. These are the realities that all of us deal with in one way or another and all of the time.

“With malice toward none – with charity for all.” What an incredible phrase. How I love it. How I wish that someday I might experience such a thing. Lincoln knew that the battered and broken Union was deeply damaged and at great risk. He knew that some dramatic healing must take place or our destiny and future would be badly marred, if not eventually destroyed. So he spoke the only principle he knew about that had any chance of bringing enough

healing to help us survive. But could anyone at the time truly imagine that such a precept would become our reality?

The truth is, it has never become our reality. Some great-hearted people have believed that this is our hope and have tried to throw their weight and their lives in this direction. But does anybody really imagine that as a nation we have banished malice from our realities, or even from our agendas? Do any of us really imagine that no malice exists, even in this small and mostly well-devoted Christian community that we call our church? Have I, its Pastor and Teacher, ever lived a single day without any malice? I can sometimes manage both malice *and* charity toward some people, even at the very same time. Like toward people who are not coming on our retreat at the end of October. Of course, I have charity and understanding for all your reasons and excuses; I have plenty of my own. Besides, in our kind of world, who could expect you to plan ahead? But whatever else is true, your absence will not help us to build unity or love in this church.

Of course, that is true every Sunday morning – not just on an important retreat weekend. High principles do not flow easily or survive well in this present realm. We would be bereft if they did not draw us. But claiming that we already live by them or completely illustrate them is hardly helpful or honest.

The Christian Life is (I presume) one of the common denominators of our participation in this church. It draws us. We want it. In comparison to other ways of life, being followers of Jesus lights our lives. So I would remind you of things we have only lightly touched on recently:

Everything important or meaningful about the Christian Life is personal and relational. Everything.

It's okay, of course, to challenge that precept and to argue about it. But the more we do so, the clearer it becomes that it is really true. Jesus is never generic. At the core of the Christian Gospel, we always run into the concept and the reality of God's love.

By the way, Abraham Lincoln knew only the King James Version of the Bible. *“And now abideth faith, hope, and charity [caritas], these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”* (I Corinthians 13:13) *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or tinkling cymbal.”* (I Corinthians 13:1) WITH CHARITY FOR ALL needs a little translation if we are to understand what Lincoln meant.

The drama of the Christian Life is always about God's love for us, inflowing until our cup runneth over – until God's love has so invaded us that it begins to work through us and to flow on toward others.

Personal and relational. What about personal? Everything in Christendom which is nonpersonal is counterfeit – a fake. Show me a nonpersonal love and I will show you what is always most false and wrong about Christianity. If Jesus' love is not personal, it does not change or convert me. Sometimes a nonpersonal love might have *some* effect, but only toward smugness and hypocrisy.

The second precept:

Satan's top strategy is to destroy genuine relationships wherever he finds them and any way he can.

We do not fear Satan; we know (believe) that all true authority comes from God. But we have reason enough to respect Satan's wiles. We have plenty of evidence to be wary and enough bruises to remind us not to underestimate our Adversary. That is, we *all* have problems with our relationships – every last one of us. If we forget to consider the real source of these difficulties, it only increases the pain and sometimes brings us to despair. Oh, to be sure, we all have our flaws, and they make things more difficult. But Mariana has never had to be perfect to win my love. I can never recall her accusing me of being perfect either. Frequently, in fact, imperfections draw our love as strongly as the attributes we admire.

Of course, we run into people “out there” who have neither honor nor ethics. They do us damage, and we hate it when they outmaneuver us. But it is a deeper wound when people we trusted – people we thought were friends or loved ones – turn out to be our enemies. How does that happen? There was a love-bond once, or it would not hurt so badly. For example, how many married couples struggle to keep their love-bonds clear and strong? How many of them have to stay alert *all the time*, or else they start to question or disbelieve the love they have for each other?

If ten percent of us or even fifty percent of us were struggling with such realities, maybe we could chalk it up to outer circumstances, unusual pressures of the moment, or temporary times of being too tired or too worried or maybe being sick or emotionally disturbed. But that is not the case. *One hundred percent of us* have to stay alert to keep our relationships clear and strong. The Adversary is clever and patient and is always testing and working to drive wedges

between people who care about each other. People who care about each other are the single greatest threat to Satan's rule (domain).

The central principle of all active Christian Life – to combat this reality of sin, this universal problem of division and separation – is called FORGIVENESS. Forgiveness is the most-often stressed and the least wobbly of all of Jesus' teachings. God forgives us, and we must forgive each other. Jesus proclaims this in teaching after parable after His own encounters with other people. *“If you do not forgive your brother from your heart – neither will my Father forgive you.”* (Matthew 18:35; 6:14-15; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3-4) It is built into everything we think or know about the Christian Path. It is even central in the Lord's Prayer – a prayer every Christian is supposed to pray constantly to remind them of their allegiance to Jesus: “Forgive us our mistakes and blunders, as we forgive those who make mistakes and blunders against us.”

Jesus is very uncompromising about this principle. There is no “unconditional malarkey” about it. If we want to participate in the Christian Life, we have to get used to the demands of forgiveness and practice them continually.

And what is the clear and central purpose of forgiveness? It is to restore relationships back to their original level of power and caring. Satan can drive wedges of misunderstanding and hurt and all other kinds of damage between us. But Satan cannot win because the Holy Spirit shows us the way of forgiveness. As fast as Satan destroys relationships, Jesus rebuilds them.

Only, there are two things imperative for us to know about forgiveness. One is this: True forgiveness always *restores* a broken relationship to the full level of trust, affection, caring, and partnership that was true before the separation occurred. We must remember this because there are levels of recovery from broken relationships that we sometimes need which do *not* restore the relationship. Sometimes we have to clean our own souls from the resentments or even the desire for vengeance that come when somebody wrongs us. This is sometimes essential, but it is not about true forgiveness. I can choose to try to not harm in any way someone who has harmed me, but without any intention of restoring the relationship. I have learned that I cannot trust some people, and I am not stupid enough or faithless enough to pretend I can trust them in the future. I will go on living my life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the less I have to do with them, the better off we will both be.

The Holy Spirit never complains or scolds me about such a position – about my taking such a stance – until or unless there has been a genuine change of heart on the part of the other person. (Or on my part.)

Which brings us to the second precept (which, by the way, many Christians do not know): There is a serious and severe condition placed on all requirements for genuine forgiveness. It is called REPENTANCE. If I want forgiveness from Jesus or from God, I must repent. That is, I must turn away from the ways of life that do not allow God to love me – that do not make room for God’s presence or the guidance of the Holy Spirit. No matter how fancy the theories or how glib the words, if I do not repent, I cannot find or feel God’s forgiveness.

And while we are on the subject: God’s forgiveness is never about tolerating me, putting me on probation, or promising to love me if I measure up to some preconceived notions of how I ought to behave or what I should be able to accomplish. God’s forgiveness – like the forgiveness God asks of us – is the total restoration of the relationship. Jesus never plays games with love. It is always “All the way, in one play.” “If you repent – if you want the relationship again, if you want the real LIFE I offer – you are in again. We are back together again. I will do anything and everything I can for you. I trust you and believe in you. I don’t mean I expect no further mistakes, but I will trust your love for me – and I promise my love for you.” That is the forgiveness of Jesus the Christ of God. And that is also the forgiveness of God. What is Jesus’ top priority and purpose? The restoration of our relationship with God. Reconciliation.

So we must never forget: That same precept is true when it comes to our forgiveness of others. Repentance – awakening, sorrow for our mistakes and the damage or hurt we have done to others – is a condition placed on our forgiveness too. We do not forgive unrepentant sinners; if we do, we side with evil. We do not pretend trust or an active love with people who clearly have no intention of living for God or obeying God’s guidance. Jesus made it really clear: If your brother sins against you seven times in a day, what is required? Don’t skip over what Jesus made clear: IF HE REPENTS, you must forgive him.

These are hard and extremely important realities of our Path. May we all take them to heart. But it does not happen by accident or automatically. Some of you have wounds from living through the war zone of recent times in this church. I am not asking anybody

to “kiss and make up” just because that would be nice for some superficial record. Nevertheless, some relationships *have* been getting restored, even for me. Perhaps it is time for all of us to take whatever relationships are still troubling us here into the presence of the Holy Spirit and ask, “Has anything changed? Is this person softer or more caring toward me than before? Am I softer or more caring toward them?”

The Spirit is never about us being generic or automatic. But the Spirit will always restore a relationship when that is a true possibility. Everybody benefits when this happens. Which churches do not have to struggle with such issues? There are none. Which churches get destroyed if they do not take such principles and realities to heart? All of them. There are no exceptions!

By the way, on rare occasion some person comes to me after I have talked about such principles and precepts and, to prove that I am wrong, they remind me that Jesus died on the Cross for everybody – that is, not just for the repentant.

That was indeed Jesus’ offer of forgiveness for the whole world. It was and it is an incredible, nearly unbelievable offer. But I will tell you whether you want to believe it or not: Not one single person in all the history of the world – not in this or any other age – has ever received one iota of benefit from that Cross unless they have repented. The forgiveness of Jesus will not activate until we repent.