

"Love's Gentleness"
Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday in Kingdomtide
Lectionary Year A
October 23, 2011
Texts: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
Dr. David T. Howeth

What does it mean to love our neighbors as ourselves, as our text from Matthew for this morning commands us? We have heard this commandment since we were children, and we know it by heart. But what does it mean for us? How do we love our neighbors in the manner this commandment instructs us to?

In order to begin to look for an answer, I want to tell you a story. It is not an unusual story at all. It is just the story of an inexperienced and frightened new father learning how to hold and care for his first child. What makes this story important to me is that it is *my* story. I am the father, and my daughter, Stephanie, who just turned thirty-two, is the child in the story.

Before Stephanie was born, her mother and I had decided that I was going to do my best to be a nurturing parent. I wanted to be as much of a primary caregiver to Stephanie as her mother would be. Therefore among other decisions that we made, her mother and I determined that she and I would both bottle feed Stephanie, so that I could share in that experience equally. As the sensitive and liberated new-age man I considered myself to be, I was ready to be a nurturing father.

There was only one problem. I was not expecting Stephanie to be quite so small when she was born. At well over eight pounds, she was big

enough as far as babies go, but nevertheless she seemed ever so tiny to me. Everything about her seemed doll-like. Her hands, her feet, her face—they were all so petite. She appeared to be extremely fragile, and when I saw her for the first time I really did feel like the proverbial bull in a china shop. The sight of her made me want to reconsider whether or not I was cut out to be a new-age man after all. One reason I laughed so hard in places when I saw the movie *Three Men and a Baby* for the first time is because I know from experience that a newborn can turn a grown man into jello.

I was determined to nurture, though. *A primary caregiver is what I wanted to be, and I was going to be one no matter what.* I would not let fear get in the way. "Be a man of the eighties," I told myself at the time. "Hold and feed that baby daughter of yours as often as you are given the chance."

You have to remember that I was not an experienced baby-holder. Growing up in Gainesville, I never had the opportunity to babysit. No one ever asked me. My only sister is just two years younger than I am, so I never held her. Before my daughter, Stephanie, came along, the only baby I had ever held was my sister's oldest son, and I did that only once for a very short time. So when it came my time to hold my own child and feed her, I was scared to death. I just knew that if I did something wrong or even the least bit careless, Stephanie would break. I was quite nervous and full of anxiety.

I did work up the courage to hold and feed her, and I never will forget what it felt like to have her in my arms for the first time. I was so careful with her, cautious with her, and concerned about her. I was

more tender in my handling of her than I had been with anything else in my life. In a word, I was gentle. By holding Stephanie, I grew in my understanding of what it means to treat another person with real gentleness.

I held Stephanie, as well as her brother, Matthew, a lot when they were newborns. In fact my fondest memories of Gainesville are of feedings in the middle of the night. We lived in a turn-of-the-century farmhouse style home on Lindsay Street, at the lower end of the historic district across from the high school. The kitchen in that house had a small den or keeping room attached to it, which made for a large, open family area. The keeping room had a fireplace in which I had installed a wood burning stove.

Since both of my children were born late in the year, Stephanie in October and Matthew in December, the old house, with its large windows and ten and twelve foot ceilings, would be on the chilly side in the middle of the night when it came time for their feedings. Each night when I would get up to do my duty, I would add more wood to the fire and adjust the stove to put out the maximum amount of heat into the room. I would warm Stephanie's bottle, and when it was the right temperature, I would get her up out of her bed and wrap her in a blanket.

Then I would sit in one of the two bentwood rockers that were situated in front of the stove, and I would hold her in my arms, rocking slightly as I fed her. The house would be absolutely quiet, except for the sound of the chair rocking, muffled as it was by the throw rug on which it sat, and the sound of the most beautiful baby in the world, contentedly sucking on her bottle. And there was the delightful mixture

of smells in the air—formula, baby powder, and burning oak.

As I have said, those experiences of holding and feeding Stephanie, and Matthew just two years later, helped to define gentleness for me. When I think of gentleness, I picture myself with the two of them in that keeping room in a big, old, cold house in the middle of the night in Gainesville.

I would like to suggest this morning that at least a part of what it means to love the neighbor as ourselves is to treat that neighbor with gentleness. It may mean that we are to be as gentle in our handling of another person's feelings as I learned to be in handling my daughter's infant body. It may mean that we see another person's spirit or self-esteem or sense of security or identity as being as potentially fragile as a newborn. It may mean that we show as much care and concern in our relationships with others as we might in holding and feeding a baby.

Gentleness is something that the New Testament insists on often, which means it is rather important. In several passages we, as Christians, are urged to be gentle toward one another. The following are some examples:

"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" [Philippians 4:5 (NIV)].

"And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those that are in opposition; if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth" [2 Timothy 2:24-25 (NASB)].

"Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show courtesy to everyone"

[Titus 3:1-2 (NRSV)].

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" [Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB)].

"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy" [James 3:17 (NASB)].

In the passage from 1 Thessalonians that was read a few moments ago, Paul describes the ministry of himself, Silas, and Timothy to the people of Thessalonica, seeking to remind them of the way this team of ministers behaved while it was there. Paul does this by first recalling for them how the ministry team did *not* act during its preaching tour. Look again at the text. Paul states how he and his co-workers did not come to Thessalonica with flattering speech, or, in other words, they were not insincere. They did not come with a pretext (literally a "cloak") of greed, that is, they did not minister to the people with any hidden, selfish motives. And the preaching team was not status-seeking in its ministry.

The passage goes on to describe the fact that Paul and his fellow ministers did not come to Thessalonica asserting their authority, even though as apostles they might have been entitled to do so. They did not choose to minister with a heavy hand, to be domineering. So they were not authoritarian, that is to say, they were not enamored by their own position and power. They did not try to control or coerce. They did not try to use their authority to boss people around, to tell people what they ought or ought not to be doing. Paul's ministry team did not choose to be overly assertive or pushy.

We know from other letters of Paul that he could choose at other times and in other situations to be much more concerned about his apostolic authority. In 1 and 2 Corinthians and in Galatians we see examples of Paul asserting himself strongly and defending the authority of his apostleship in response to attacks from his opponents. Paul could come down on congregations with all the authority of an apostle when he felt as though it were the appropriate thing to do, the right thing to do, the necessary thing to do.

But instead of being insincere, selfish, or even domineering, Paul and his companions chose to be, as the text describes it, as gentle with the Thessalonians as a nursing mother tenderly caring for her own children. Although many modern translations render the Greek word *trophos* as "nurse," the word in its original language may have meant either "nurse" or "mother." For this reason in both the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Standard Bible, the word in Greek is translated "nursing mother" rather than "nurse."

I prefer seeing the image that Paul is using here as one of a nursing mother. The image of a nurse or foster-mother (the equivalent of the nanny in English families) is a strong one, for certainly a nanny can be seen as a primary care-giver, but there is something even more intimate about the nursing mother analogy [*Knox Preaching Guides*, p. 11]. If it were Paul's intention to paint a picture of gentleness in this passage, as it seems that he was, he could not have chosen a better image than that of a mother or a father feeding an infant child.

Paul goes on to say in this passage that out of their deep affection for the Thessalonians, he and Silas and Timothy not only gave them the

gospel, but gave them their own lives as well. Here is a picture of complete self-giving out of genuine concern. As true ministers of the gospel, they shared with this congregation more than what they had to teach about Jesus Christ, they shared the content of their own lives as touched and transformed by that same gospel of Jesus Christ. They shared who they were as they shared who they understood Christ to be.

I believe that we find in this passage of scripture, then, a beautiful picture of what it means really to love someone, what it means to love the neighbor as ourselves. It means that a truly loving relationship is based on gentleness that grows out of radical self-giving. And isn't that exactly the way a parent loves the child and the way God loves all his children? Loving someone as we should leaves no room for insincerity, self-gratification, or domination. There is no place for insensitivity, manipulation, or the violation of boundaries. There is no reason for being attacking, abrasive, or abusive.

Loving someone in this way means that we treat that person gently and tenderly as we give ourselves completely to him or her. *We love by being gentle.* Like a mother nursing her child or even like me feeding Stephanie and Matthew by the stove in the middle of a cold winter's night, being gentle is being as careful as we can not to hurt another person in any way whatsoever.

By the example of his ministry in Thessalonica, Paul shows us how to love the neighbor as ourselves. Our relationships with others are to be characterized by nurturing love that expresses itself in gentleness and self-giving. May our relationships with all those with whom we come in contact—our spouses, our children, our parents, our fellow church

members, our friends, our colleagues, and our other neighbors—be loving relationships, and may those relationships be characterized most of all by love's gentleness.