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Discipleship: not a destination but an ongoing journey  
Martin Grove United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Galatians 5:1, 13-26 and Luke 9:51-62

Let me ask you something. Do you think if you had been born in Palestine 2000 years ago, and you were a male, and a fisherman, and you had been baptized by John ... and were one of John's disciples, just like Jesus was ... OK enough imagining already. There is only one more. Given all of that, do you think you would have liked Jesus. Remember, we are told that - as Christians - we should follow Jesus. But does that mean that we would have liked him? I'm not so sure.

Take our reading from Luke today. People want to join Jesus on his quest and he is not really very encouraging. Not only does Jesus not let people say goodbye to their loved ones before joining him, but Jesus also says that anyone who is not 100% committed to the project is not fit to even begin. Wow! Why is it that Jesus seems so harsh in this passage. Do you think it's just possible that Jesus was a bit stressed when he realized he was heading towards Jerusalem? The place that kills prophets and stones those who speak with God?

Or is it possible that the whole project for Jesus wasn't turning out as planned anyway. When the village does not receive Jesus and his disciples, the disciples offer to use bolts of lightning from the sky to roast the village and kill the inhabitants. The text says that Jesus rebukes them. But this story is only weeks before Jesus's crucifixion. Perhaps Jesus was starting to wonder just what kind of impatient morons were going to be in charge of his ministry when he left in a couple of weeks? If the disciples thought that an appropriate responses to people who don't agree with you was to kill them, was Jesus starting to wonder if even his own disciples had completely failed to understand the purpose of his ministry? Was Jesus concerned that once he wasn't around to help, the ministry he had started would be on the rocks faster than anyone could say the word "Pentecost"? To be honest, to our modern ears it doesn't seem like a very promising start, does it?. I wonder if Jesus was tempted to turn and head away from Jerusalem, to

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give his team more time to gel and to have the chance to explain the purpose his ministry - again - to the disciples.

But in spite of what seem like large hurdles, Jesus does continue on the road to Jerusalem. It's almost as if Jesus's ministry was a work in progress, an ongoing journey and not a final destination that had to be perfect. Jesus's ministry was an ongoing journey, even for Jesus.

And that truly is "Good News". Because as Christians, our faith journey is a work in progress and an ongoing journey too. Discipleship is not a destination, it is an ongoing journey. And that's a very good thing for us. Particularly if we consider our reading from James this morning. James reminds us of the clarion call of Christianity, the one statement that is quintessentially Christian, namely the call to love your neighbour as yourself, with the understanding that "your neighbour" includes everyone, even your enemies. And how are you doing with that? How's that working for you? Have you yourself found ways to love your enemies 100% of the time, or is that a project that is evolving, that is an ongoing journey for you? I figured as much. Me too.

"Love your enemies" makes a great slogan. But what does it really mean? If you go online or talk to people on the street, you will find that people have many different ways to understand the phrase "love your enemies". Some of the ways that people explain "love your enemies" sound to me like elaborate excuses to not actually do it. For example, someone I heard this week was arguing that love your enemies only referred to personal interactions, and should not be applied to foreign affairs. This guy was literally arguing "love your enemies" and "bomb Iran" at the same time. I suppose I'm just too simple-minded to understand those sorts of mental gymnastics. I actually agree with the bumper sticker that says, "When Jesus said love your enemies, I'm pretty sure he did not mean kill them."

But beyond not killing people - an aspiration that apparently we do not all share anyway - what does it mean to love your enemies? One clue comes from the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5), "For if you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even reprobates do the same?"

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It's easy to love the people who love us. And we should do that with joy of course. But loving those who love you is its own reward. What about the people who don't love us, either because they don't even know us, or because they actually hate us? That's usually a different story, right?

Another clue comes from the Lord's Prayer. Depending on the version. From what I know you consider to be the "standard version" we have, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." But that's a bit too poetic to drive the point home. The Lord's Prayer we sometimes use from Central America puts it this way, "Forgive us for keeping silent in the face of injustice and for burying our dreams. Don't let us fall into the temptation of taking up the same arms as the enemy, but deliver us from the evil that disunites us." The phrase "do not take up the same arms as the enemy" means a number of things, but it includes the idea that we should not respond to hate with more hate. We need to respond to hate with love. And again, we are back to "love your enemies". It's almost like it's a theme that runs through Jesus's ministry or something.

Another clue comes from our own hearts. We all know - when we bother to reflect on it - that when we choose to hate someone or something, that hatred destroys the one who is hated, but it also destroys the one who does the hating. On those occasions where we choose to dwell on hate, that hatred destroys us just as surely as it destroys the other. Perhaps "love your enemies" sounds a bit utopian, but hating your enemies is the road to destruction for everybody. Hating your enemies has been in vogue for 1000's of years, and it simply does not work. It does not work unless you value winning over peace.

As an aside. Do you want to live in peace? Are you sick of living with wars and threats of wars? I'll bet that this week we all are. Do you ever wonder why there never is a war that ends all wars. Perhaps by now it's obvious to you. But my own theory is this. Any time there is a war (and this applies whether or not we are talking about foreign affairs, or the affairs of our own hearts) we of course try to win. But the simple truth is that when we ever win a war, we create a loser. And that loser resents losing. So that loser will build up enough strength to fight another war at a later date. Anytime we win a

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war it plants the seeds of the next war. The secret to ending all wars is this. We just need to decide to lose a war and not retaliate. That would break the seemingly endless cycle of perpetual wars. So what's the real secret? Love your enemies. Love doesn't mean caving in or doing what they ask for necessarily. But our response needs to come from a place of love. Does that sound impossible? Does that sound impossible for people who live with the love of God in their hearts? Does that sound impossible for people feel forgiven. Does that sound impossible for resurrection people? Does that sound impossible for people who have found deep spiritual healing? No. Not impossible. But for most of us, it will be a work in progress, an ongoing journey.

I find myself wondering how St. Paul would respond to this sermon. In Galatians today, Paul invites us to consider a contrast between "living by the flesh" and "living by the spirit". He states that the works of the flesh are obvious: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these". By contrast, he lists the fruits of the spirit as: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I'm not sure this his lists are complete though. I think the "way of the world" is to win at all costs - even at the cost of our relationships. The "way of the world" is to hate, forgetting how similar we are to our enemies. In contrast, the "way of the spirit" is to follow the more difficult path of love, even to the point of loving your enemies. Just remember. When you can authentically love an enemy, it says a lot about your own spirit. But loving your enemy also speaks volumes about the type of God that you believe in. Do you want to convert an enemy? Love them. And make sure they see you doing it. Love is the only creative and redemptive transforming power in the universe, just like Martin Luther King Jr. said<sup>1</sup>.

So how are we to hear this message today. We are all "good" people, right? We do our best to love our neighbours and perhaps even stray into the territory of loving our enemies, don't we?

Tomorrow I begin 3 weeks of continuing education. So I feel very tempted to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhMNR9NtSD0>

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hand out some homework now. I'm going to assume that you agree with me that living faithful lives is a work in progress, an ongoing journey. Which means that all of us can improve something. So I'm going to suggest that each of us takes some time over the summer to consider seriously if we ourselves have any "enemies" in our own lives that we need to learn to love better. Your "enemy" might be another person. It might be a memory from your past. It might be something about your present reality. Look with an open heart. If you have troubles knowing where to start, consider if there are any areas in your life where your first knee-jerk response is hatred, and that might give you some clues to help guide your search.

Or perhaps you actually hate the idea I've just presented. Start there! Reflect on your life and what causes you to hate this idea so much.

The point of the exercise is not just to identify hate in your own life. The point of the exercise is to identify it so that you can work on it, transforming that hate into love. Do this - as Jesus said - and you will live. You will live in peace.

Have a wonder-ful summer, .... Amen.