

Easter VI

Cycle B, 5.9.21

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48/1 John 7:7-10/
John 15:9-17

THE LOVE THAT DRIVES OUT HATRED

Love one another

Love your neighbor as yourself

Love your enemies

*No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

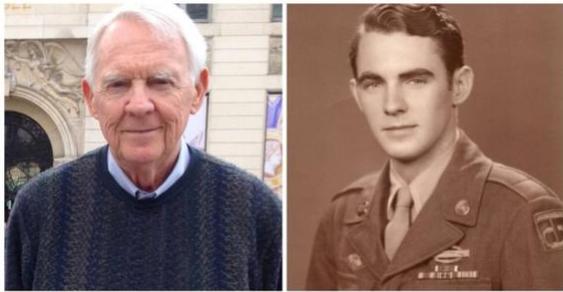
These are noble words but not very practical. Certainly not these days when we are so terribly polarized. Maybe later, when things cool down a bit. But are they really so impractical? Maybe now is exactly the right time. These are indeed difficult times, but there have been much harder times in the past. In May, 1940, the Germans invaded and occupied Holland. It wasn't long before they started rounding up the Jews for transportation to one of the death camps such as Auschwitz. One of those Jews was Etty Hillesum. Etty was completely unchurched, with no religious training whatsoever. The emptiness in her life was filled with dissolute behavior which, like drugs, provided temporary relief but no lasting solace. Knowing that there had to be more, she entered into therapy and, through her therapist, discovered God. Her discovery was without formal training. No catechism, no Bat Mitzvah; just a fundamental understanding of the essence of God, which she gleaned largely through the Gospel of Matthew.



The essence that she understood was that God is love and that love has to be expressed through our interaction with others. As a Jew, she rejected opportunities to hide or escape, choosing, rather, to cast her lot with her people and to share their fate. While awaiting her own roundup, Etty volunteered at a transit camp, comforting and providing for the needs of those Jews scheduled for transportation to the death camps. Etty observed that her fellow Jews were consumed with hatred for the Nazis, which was understandable, but she also observed that their hatred made them miserable and prevented them from living to the fullest what life was left to them. Intuitively, she saw the wisdom of Jesus' words when he said, "*Whose sins you retain, you retain.*" Etty refused to hate the Nazis. While working in the transit camp, she continuously looked into their faces, hopeful for some sign of humanity. When her turn came to be transported to Auschwitz, she faced her fate in peace. Two and one half months after arriving at Auschwitz, Etty was dead. Her diaries and letters were left in the care of a friend and eventually, in the 1980's, they were published.

Four years after the German invasion of Holland, E. Carver McGriff, of Indianapolis, Indiana, landed on the shores of Normandy, France as a replacement for one of the many casualties of the previous days combat. In the platoon to which Carver was assigned, there was a group of Mexican Americans. Carver didn't like them. They kept to themselves, they spoke a strange language and they stayed up late at night singing sad songs in Spanish. He especially didn't like their leader. After a month of brutal combat, Carver's platoon found itself cut off and out of ammunition. They were forced to surrender. Led by the

Germans back to a nearby village, they suddenly came under an intense artillery barrage. In Carver's own words:



"Then all hell broke loose. A devastating barrage began exploding in our midst, wounding and killing Germans and Americans alike. The world went blank. I felt a brief sensation of floating in the air, my next conscious awareness that of lying flat in the middle of the street, shells exploding around me. As I lay there in the street, half paralyzed, calling for help, I felt myself being picked up gently like a baby in a mother's arms. I looked up into the face of the man who was saving me. He was the leader of that group of Mexicans, the man I didn't like, the man I treated like an outcast. He carried me to relative safety alongside a nearby building, then went back out into the midst of the exploding shells for someone else to save. I learned that day a lesson I would not forget. It defines for me a form of love that has nothing to do with sentiment and valentines. It's the kind one reads about in the Bible. It was also a lesson for me about prejudice, one I would never forget."

After a month of captivity, the Germans retreated, leaving Carver to be rescued by the advancing Americans. He was evacuated to a hospital in England where his wounds could be properly tended to. While there, his education in radical love continued. A fellow patient disagreed with another patient's undying hatred for the Germans. He had been seriously wounded in the head during an artillery

bombardment and was lying, paralyzed, on the field with shells exploding all around him. A German medic came to him and dragged him to the safety of a slit trench and then lay on top of him to protect him.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Who is my neighbor?

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Who is my friend?



On Sunday, May 14th, 1961, during the Civil Rights Movement, a Freedom Rider bus pulled into the Greyhound bus station in Anniston, Alabama. There it was met by an angry mob led by the local Ku Klux Klan. With bats and pipes, they attacked the bus, smashing windows and slashing the tires. The bus pulled out of the station, followed by the mob, many of whom had just come from church and were dressed in their Sunday best. Limping on the slashed tires, the bus only made it six miles, where it pulled over in front of the Forsyth and Son Grocery store, home of Janie Forsyth McKinney. Janie was twelve years old and white.

Surrounding the bus, the mob held the doors closed to prevent anyone from exiting while someone else threw a firebomb inside the bus. When a gas tank exploded, the mob backed away, giving the occupants an opportunity to get out of the smoke-filled bus. Burned and overcome by smoke inhalation, the riders stumbled out

only to be met by the fists, bats and pipes of the angry crowd. Witnessing this from her doorstep, Janie Forsyth, without thinking, grabbed a bucket and cups and took water to the stricken passengers, giving them water to drink and bathing their burned bodies. She had to make several trips back and forth to her house to refill the bucket, thereby attracting the notice of the crowd, who jeered her and called her names. The Klan noticed as well. They met later to discuss whether she should be tried as an adult and what the punishment should be. Janie was ostracized at school and, eventually, the Forsyth's found it necessary to move away from Anniston.



The incident was never discussed or even mentioned in the Forsyth household and Janie always assumed that her father had never forgiven her for her actions. After his death Janie asked her mother if that was the case. Her reply was, *"No, child, that's not right. He told me that he was never prouder of you than he was on that day."*

Besides being heroic acts of loving kindness in moments of crisis, what do all these stories have in common? Each involves encounter with 'the other', who is met as a fellow human being without regard to race, religion or political beliefs simply a fellow human being in need of help. Each encounter was transformational. There is no way of knowing how many people were transformed by Etty Hillesum's love and compassion, even if that meant

facing death in peace rather than in the grip of fear and hatred. E. Carver McGriff was transformed by his experiences in World War Two. After the war he became a Methodist minister, incorporating his experiences in war into his understanding of God, the meaning of love and what it means to be a Christian. Janie's father, who may have been complicit in the events in front of his store, was transformed by his daughter's actions. Janie Forsyth McKinney graduated from Auburn with a degree in secondary education. At the Alabama high school where she taught, she advocated for her African American students and assisted them in confronting the unfair practices of racist fellow teachers. She is currently a communications specialist at UCLA, giving periodic talks on her experiences in the Civil Rights Movement.



So what does all of this mean to us? We are living in a time of political polarization, racial bigotry, fear, suspicion and anger. All of these are toxic and none of these are Christian. Just as Lazarus was loosed from his burial bindings, so, too, we must loose ourselves from the bindings of darkness that keep us from living fully in the light. Let us seek out the other, if not in a moment of crisis, then in the normal events of day to day. Maybe in a greeting or a kind gesture let us demonstrate that we are Easter people, people of the light, people of love. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hatred cannot drive out hatred, only love can do that."*

Buzz Sherwood