

Holes in the World

26 March 2006

Bible passage: **Luke 6:31 (CEV)**

Jesus said, “Treat others just as you want to be treated.”

Sermon Nugget: There is a lot of hatred and darkness in the world. How do we deal with it? How do we combat it?

The title for this morning came from a recent song by the Eagles entitled, “Hole in the World.” In part, the lyrics, which are quite repetitive, talk about the world being clouded with fear and sorrow. In other words, there is a great deal of darkness, or things that seem like huge holes, in the world in which we find ourselves living. There are holes of sadness, fear, pain, hatred, prejudice, intolerance and brokenness. Our relationships, both personal and global, are fractured and fragmented. That may be why the Eagles sang those words: “There’s a hole in the world tonight; there’s a cloud of fear and sorrow.”

If we stop to think about it, we probably have to admit that that’s true. All we have to do is look at the newspaper, or watch the news to get a hint of the kind of hole in which the world finds itself. There’s unbridled anger, as one person lashes out at another, sometimes even resorting to violence. There are atrocities that are virtually unimaginable that are still going on around us on this planet. There’s cruel and inhumane treatment of human beings by other human beings.

I find myself wondering how on earth we can treat one another so cruelly? Why, when we’re all just human beings, are we so quick to blast someone else? Why do we seemingly have such little regard for others who share this planet with us? What is happening?

Is it that we’re filled with some sort of irreconcilable anger? Is it that we are afraid? Is it that we are consumed with hatred—for self and others? Is it mental illness? Frankly, I don’t have a clue where all this stuff is coming from; I only know that it exists in all too many places, and something needs to be different.

I was trying to make some sense of it in my own head, and I may be dead wrong, but I wonder if maybe part of the problem is our disrespect for the worth and dignity of each and every human being. Somehow we think others aren’t as worthy as we are, and that we have a right to ignore them, to persecute them, to be rude and intolerant to those who don’t look like us, act like us, think like us, believe like us.

The thing that surprises and saddens me, frankly, is how that very same intolerance and disregard for others exists among those of us who claim to be Christians, who profess to be faithful followers of God. Let me share with you what I mean.

A month or so ago, I was asked to speak to a group of pastors in another state. They were interested in learning

about The Garden, and the how’s and why’s of who we are. Everything went fairly, until near the end of my presentation during the question and answer time. A question was asked about what I call the litmus test, as to whether or not I/we are “Christian.”

Now, frankly, much of this was my own fault. I should have answered differently, and still been truthful and kept my integrity intact. I did answer truthfully, but I regret to say, a bit defensively and not very lovingly, and to put it mildly, an uproar ensued.

I appreciated those who came to me for further discussion, because that gave us the opportunity to share various points of view; however, not everyone took the time to do that. Instead, I have received a couple of really nasty emails from the Christian pastors at this conference, which have disappointed me, and caused me to harden my view of those who are on the other end of the theological spectrum from where I am.

Frankly, because of that experience, I can see even more so how intolerance and disrespect can grow, and I realize that I’m just as guilty of it as those who disagreed so vehemently with me! Intolerant...that’s what I was with those who were such right-wing conservatives; and intolerant is what many of them were of my more liberal theological bent—both of which, I might add, fit well within the parameters of what’s termed “Christian.”

Accordingly, I started thinking about intolerance, and religious intolerance in particular, and did a little research. The verb “to tolerate” means **to recognize and respect others’ beliefs, practices, etc., without sharing them.** Religious intolerance, on the other hand, is about not respecting the fundamental right of other people to hold religious beliefs that are different from our own.

This kind of religious intolerance is happening the world over. We certainly see it in the Middle East with the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. We see it in Iraq, and in other parts of the Arab world between the Sunnis and the Shiites; we see it in Northern Ireland between the Protestants and the Catholics, and those examples are only the tip of the iceberg. Examples of religious intolerance are found around the globe, and right here at home. Such intolerance seems to be more the rule than the exception.

As one body of those trying to be faithful, what can we do to speak a different voice? How do we proclaim a different message from one of intolerance, disrespect, and disregard for the sacred worth of all human beings?

That’s where our Bible passage, brief as it is, comes in. It is a little different version of what we usually call the Golden Rule. It reads this way: **“Treat others just as you want to be treated.”**

Jesus is the one speaking, but what we may not realize is that Jesus sets forth the Golden Rule in the context of talking about loving our enemies. In fact, this passage begins with the words, **“Love your enemies, and be good to everyone**

who hates you. Ask God to bless anyone who curses you, and pray for everyone who is cruel to you.”

Whoa! I don't know about you, but reading that again really pulled me up short. How many times have I, how many times have you, wanted to get back at those who hurt us? How many times do we pay back a negative comment with one that's even more negative and pejorative? On the other hand, how many times have we stopped to bless those who are angry enough to curse at us or who are cruel toward us? Any of the times we've answered cruelty with cruelty, we've blown it! We've failed to live as Jesus would have us live.

The interesting thing is that Jesus wasn't the only one who taught such ethical living. It's been so prevalent throughout the centuries that it is regarded today as a moral truth. However, the Golden Rule is probably best understood as a principle by which we can determine our consistency, that is, whether or not our actions toward another person or group is in or out of harmony with our desires for how we want to be. If we violate the Golden Rule, then we are violating the spirit of fairness and concern that lies at the very heart of morality. It seems to me that the 18th German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was echoing this teaching of Jesus when he became the first philosopher to put respect for person, including oneself as a person, at the very center of moral theory. That means that, when we are being disrespectful toward another person, we are not acting in accord with the Golden Rule. We've forgotten, or ignore, or fail to recognize that person is a child of God, created and loved by God—just like us. And by our lack of respect, we are being unfaithful to how God would want us to live.

What is another way to live and act? Maybe it's like a story I heard about a Cherokee who told his grandson about a battle that was raging inside him. He said, “My son, it is between 2 wolves. One is evil: anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good: joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute, and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee answered simply, “The one I feed.”

How do we feed the right one, the loving one? You and I don't seem capable of doing that on our own. It seems to me that we need God in our lives in a vital way—to soften our hearts, to give us the capacity to put ourselves in another's place, to try to understand what he or she is experiencing, and then to try on a little compassion for others, whose lives may be far different from ours. We need God to fill our hearts with love for every human being in this world.

Let's ask God to help us. Would you pray with me? God of love, we certainly don't understand sometimes how you continue to love us. We're selfish and self-centered people most of the time—people who only see others often as objects, not as real people with hurts and sorrows and pain.

God, teach us compassion and understanding. Fill our hearts with your love; infuse us with your spirit, and hang in there with us as we try today, tomorrow and every day, to follow the teachings of your son, about how we are to treat others. Maybe if we can do that, there won't be quite so many holes in the world. Thank you, God.

Amen.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we'll think about what the old Cherokee said, and ask ourselves, “Which wolf am I feeding? Can I, can you, let God's love be the food that fills us to overflowing so we can truly love one another, so we can begin to treat everyone with dignity and respect? I hope and pray that we can.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.