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John 15.12-25

[Jesus said:] ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, “They hated me without a cause.”

When the World Hates You

The gospel is supposed to be good news. Is this *good* news?

It's not easy to follow Christ, to love one another as Christ has loved us. This Lenten season reminds us that to follow Christ is to follow him to the cross. This gospel reminds us that to really follow Christ is to be hated by the world.

Those of us who are queer know something about being hated by the world. We are reminded of it every time we open a newspaper and read about another tragic death, another voter referendum, another “Christian” minister advocating for violence, as our neighbor – the Reverend James David Manning of ATLAH World Missionary Church – has done. In Uganda and Russia, and even here in the United States, violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons is perpetrated in the name of Christ! In John's gospel, Jesus goes on to say

that “an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God.” (John 16.2) This gospel is speaking to the early church, which faced violent persecution in its day. This gospel is speaking to us now.

Those of us who are queer and Christian know something about being hated by the world. We are reminded of it every time we hear condescending remarks from “New Atheists,” and every time we hear the word “abomination” from right-wing Christians. We are reminded of it in the story of 8-year-old Sunnie Kahle. Her Christian school told her grandparents that Sunnie was too much of a tomboy, and she would either have to start dressing and acting like a girl, or find another school. Her grandparents, being good Christians, pulled her out of that school.

Again, we might ask ourselves: Where is the Good News in this? How is this *gospel*? How can someone like me – and someone like you – dare call ourselves evangelical in this day and age?

And how many of us cringe when we hear that word: evangelical? Even though many of our liberal protestant denominations claim an evangelical heritage and identity, we often think of evangelical as conservative and fundamentalist, as opposed to mainline and progressive. Even though the gospel calls us to evangelize – to share the good news – we often shy away from the task, embarrassed by the examples of Christianity perpetuated today. Even though we know the word comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion), and means “good news,” when we see that word in a newspaper headline, it's almost always followed by bad news. I'm sure by now you've heard the good news, followed by the bad news, about World Vision, the evangelical Christian relief organization. The decision to hire Christians in same-sex marriages was reversed two days later, after “evangelical” donors threatened to withdraw support.

In the midst of all this, John reminds us of the nature of our calling. We didn't choose this; God chose us. We are called to share in the cost and joy of discipleship, to bear fruits that will last. We

are called to be evangelicals! We are called to bring the good news that hatred and death will not have the final say. We are charged with the task of loving each other – of re-creating the world to reflect the love God has for us.

The task isn't sugar-coated here. The gospel we are called to evangelize isn't easy. We are called to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. We are called to a radical love that transcends the borders of social convention. We are called to love the poor and oppressed, and we are called to love fundamentalists and extremists. We are called to love others in the face of terrible hatred.

And the world *will* hate us for it. If we are to challenge the social evils of this world: selfishness, greed, hatred, and discrimination, the world will hate us. If we preach the gospel, not being content with sharing comfortable lies to get people in the pews on Sunday mornings, the world will hate us. And when the world does hate us for loving and serving others, for comforting the afflicted, then we will know that we are doing our job.

Loving those who hate us does not mean being idle in the face of oppression. As Jesus said: “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

The love we are called to share has the power to transform the world. The love we are called to share is the love that strengthens us to remain faithful to our cause as evangelical Christians, or as evangelical Unitarians, or whatever your faith tradition is, because we all have a gospel worth sharing. Let us take up the call to be evangelicals, and bring the good news to the world! Let us bear fruit that will last. When the world hates us without cause, remember that they hated the One who loves us.