

SERMON: "TEACHING FEAR AND PREJUDICE"

SCRIPTURE: PHILEMON 8-16

DATE: AUGUST 9, 2015

Philemon 8-16 (NIV)

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,

And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

"You've Got To Be Carefully Taught" is one of the lesser known songs from Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific.

It caused quite a stir when the musical opened in 1949. Indeed, attempts were made to pull the song, but the composers held firm.

The song referred to the quandary an American Naval lieutenant was in because of his love for a native woman. Because they were "different", the lovers weren't allowed to love.

The song was all about prejudice and, in 1949, that wasn't a topic people wanted to deal with.

Being different is one of the foundations that prejudice is built upon. Prejudice---prejudging something or someone as bad or inferior or wrong.

Prejudice is one of the most despicable evils in our world. It's the root cause of countless pain and suffering on a personal and national and international scale.

Differences in colour, religion, cultural heritage, economic class, education, sexual identity. The list goes on and on. When people are

different or even perceived to be different, there is always the potential for prejudice.

This evil has always been a part of society but recently it has reared its ugly head most strongly and tragically in the shooting of innocent church-goers in Charleston and the resulting burning of Black Churches throughout the south. As well, the whole "Black Lives Matter" movement has made headlines and had a tremendous influence around the world.

If anyone thought the election of a Black President meant that racism was no longer a factor in the US, then they've been proven very, very wrong!

Our Scripture lesson is a small portion of a small letter written by the Apostle Paul to a man named Philemon. It speaks to the problem of prejudice.

Philemon was a prosperous, active Christian. As was the custom, then, rich people owned slaves. Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus.

Owned is the proper word. Slaves were considered part of a person's property. They were treated as such. The master had the power of life and death over their slaves---no questions asked. A slave was not a person---a slave was a thing.

Onesimus had run away and landed in Rome. Somehow he met Paul who was imprisoned there. Through this contact, Onesimus was converted to Christianity. He worked with Paul and was a great help to the imprisoned Apostle.

Eventually it was determined that Onesimus should go back to Philemon. Paul was concerned about how Philemon would react to this return. Paul wanted to make sure Onesimus was welcomed---not punished. So he dashed off a quick, personal letter to his friend, Philemon.

In the letter Paul pleaded for Philemon to accept Onesimus back, but he wanted more than that. It wouldn't be good enough just for Philemon to waive his right to punish his runaway slave. Paul wanted Philemon to change the way he related to Onesimus. They were still master and slave but Paul also pointed out they were now both Christians. They were now brothers in Christ. Their relationship had to change even if their position in life remained the same.

It wasn't the time and Paul wasn't the person to end the evil of slavery. But things were now beginning to be different, in a good way, because the Church was open and welcoming in the composition of its membership.

In the Early Church, Christianity knew no socio-economic boundaries. Rich---poor, master---slave, Jew---Gentile, Palestinian---Samaritan, black---white.

Christianity preached and evangelized anyone and everyone. A person's colour, culture or class wasn't an issue. Faith touched them all. The Church was open to them all.

Paul's letter to Philemon stressed the fact that there was no place for prejudice in the Church.

It echoes Paul's words in Galatians 3:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Unity in Christ.

Equality in Christ.

Unity and equality despite differences.

We've been tossing the word prejudice around quite a bit this morning. Just what does it mean?

The dictionary defines prejudice as: "an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race or their supposed characteristics."

Prejudice is prejudging someone without all the evidence.

It's irrational.

It's a form of hostility.

In the late sixties the TV series Star Trek, the original one, dealt very cleverly with many social issues. One show was directed around the problem of prejudice.

Two men, a master and a slave from a distant planet were picked up by the Starship Enterprise. They were at war with each other. The only difference between the two men was colour. The slave was black on his left side and white on his right side. The master was the reverse.

The slave was considered inferior---little more than an animal. The master was considered superior. He was supreme. Yet the only difference between them was what side had black or white. Otherwise they looked the same. They had the same intelligence, the same physical strength, the same needs.

To the crew the whole thing was ridiculous.

As the viewers watched they were led to the same conclusion as the crew.

And the message came home: was the master-slave hatred between these two men any more irrational than the prejudice between whites and blacks in the late 60's when the show was broadcast?

Such is prejudice.

It's irrational.

It can lead to unspeakable hostility.

Yet, as Rodgers and Hammerstein remind us, prejudice is taught--prejudice can be learned.

Racism and prejudice against the poor have been around our society from the beginning---hundreds and hundreds of years. The teaching is deeply entrenched. But, recently, we've been taught another prejudice. It's not really new but it's just as irrational.

The irrational can be offered as rational when critical thinking isn't used or is overwhelmed by something else---something that since 9/11 has become the basis for all kinds of prejudice.

Since 9/11 a different basis, other than supposed superiority/inferiority, has been emphasized when it comes to prejudging others. This foundation has always been there but in the last decade or so it has come to the forefront.

It's the basis---the foundation of fear.

Prejudice against people who are different, has been stoked by governments and leaders primarily to instill fear.

Fear of people who are different---fear of Muslims, fear of those who dress differently, fear of those who look different, fear of those who believe different things.

And so, all those of the Muslim faith have been painted with the same terrorist brush. All those who look like they might be Muslim, even if they aren't, are subject to being given a rough time.

9/11 has brought about a different fear of a different group but the result is the same: prejudice---irrational fear and hatred mixed with propaganda and taught as truth.

It's that taught fear and prejudice that has people thinking terrorist attacks are not only possible---they are imminent.

Any time fear and prejudice are joined we have an unholy alliance.

It's that taught fear and prejudice that provided the fuel for Dylann Roof to enter a Black Church's Bible Study and kill 9 innocent people---people who were studying Scripture---people from a Church that had a long history of seeking justice and reconciliation between blacks and whites.

As a white supremacist, Roof, was afraid of more and more equality, more and more shifting of power. He was taught and he believed that, somehow, African-Americans were taking over his country.

If we give in to any kind of fear we are going to have a very difficult time not giving in to prejudice.

As Christians we must never give in to prejudice. We need to recognize where it comes from and take the irrationality out of the equation. That takes no end of effort to try to understand situations and conditions and differences when the easy way is to not think---just react.

And, if we claim we hold no prejudice, I invite us to think about how we react when Christian prayer is taken out of public forums--- public places now shared by many others who are not Christian.

William Ward once said, "No person is strong enough to carry a cross and a prejudice at the same time."

We have the choice to put our strength to good use.

When we allow fear and prejudice to take over our thinking and our actions rather than taking the time to critically think things through, we do ourselves and others an incredible injustice.

When we allow teachings contrary to Christ to enter our hearts, we do more than hurt one another. We hurt the cause of Christ.

In the midst of all the anger and violence and hatred showing itself in our world, we need the cause of Christ to show its love, grace and hope now more than ever before.

That's what needs to be carefully taught.

That's what needs to be learned.

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