

## Learning to love the unlovable

A sermon by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 15, 2009.

*...Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him*

Mark 1:40

Yesterday was Valentine's Day and you may have remembered someone special in your life or you may have let the day pass without notice. I smiled as I noticed some men with goofy expressions in their late search for flowers, cards or candy who looked as though they didn't have a clue as to what to choose.

We don't know much about St. Valentine. Tradition says that he was a Roman priest who lived in the third century when it was against the law to be a Christian. It is said that when he secretly performed marriages against the orders of the Emperor Claudius, Valentine was imprisoned. While in prison, he wrote notes to people, telling them how much he cared for them and encouraging them in the time of persecution. He would sign his letters, "Your Valentine." He is remembered for his conviction that God's love is stronger than any other power or force. He encouraged his guards to become Christians and when the Emperor heard of this, he had Valentine put to death on February 14 in the year 270 A.D. I like to think of such a person so filled with God's grace that he could love not only those for whom it is easy, but especially those who make themselves difficult to love.

We remember those we care for on their birthday and at Christmas, but how do we express our feelings for them the rest of the year? How do we let them know that we care for them in other ways? We don't want them to think we take them for granted and the challenge is to be creative in the ways we can show how much we care for them.

In the gospel today we read about a man with leprosy, a skin disease prevalent in that time and place. People were afraid to touch them and stayed away from them and kept them isolated in leper colonies. When the man comes to Jesus to be healed of his leprosy, Jesus not only touches him, he heals him. His healing is a sign that the power of God's love is greater than any disease. It tells us that God loves all of us, especially those whom we find difficult and could easily ignore.

Christianity is all about loving and respecting our neighbor as we would want for ourselves. It's easy to love those who love us, but what about those whom we find it difficult to love? What about those who don't like us? How do we still care for and respect them as God's people? We all know people who are difficult. For whatever reason, they may be reluctant to show a better side of themselves. The last thing we feel like doing is to be a friend to obnoxious people. When someone has hurt us, really deeply hurt us, our reaction may be to hurt them back or withdraw and stop speaking to them. But then we would be behaving no better than they and where does that get us? I once knew someone who stopped speaking to anyone who offended him. He explained that he had to protect himself. He died totally destitute and alone. It often happens that when we get to know difficult people we discover that person is living with turmoil we don't know or understand.

There are also those whom we may like at first but learn that they don't care for us. How are we able to care for someone like that? Over the years I kept two folders of letters. One folder grew full over time with thoughtful notes of appreciation from people whom I had helped at various life points. When I was cleaning out my office before I retired, I reread

many of those letters. But there was another file that was thankfully rather thin that contained some really mean and nasty letters. There was one who bad mouthed me for telling her what she didn't want to hear. There was another who told me point blank I was the wrong person for being rector of the parish. And there was another from one who used me as a scapegoat for a rift in the family. You can guess what I did with those letters.

It is always a greater challenge to love those for whom you have every reason to dislike. Forgive and forget? Well, forgetting can be very difficult when the memory of a hurt carries deep scars or even trauma. But we can learn to put the hurt behind us and not let it dominate us. Until we forgive, we are captive to the hurt and anger.

I find that it helps to remember that God loves and cares for each of us and that God loves the difficult people as much as everyone else. A good place to begin with those whom you don't like and just can't stand to be around is to pray for them. Pray for what may be going on in their life of which you may be unaware. Pray for the strength to find some good that is kept hidden. Often when we get to know difficult and unlovable people we learn that there are factors in their life of which we are not aware that helps to understand them. That doesn't excuse their behavior, but it helps to understand.

I often ride the commuter train and the "T" and think about those sitting around me. There are students with their books and their I-pods, business people with the lap tops and lovers huddled close together. There are others who look destitute and alone. One man across the aisle proceeded to tell me his life story in front of everyone else. I wonder about these brief encounters and pray that God's love be with them as they go on their way. I pray that they have someone to love and who loves them.

Pray for those difficult people in your life and ask God to help you find a way to reach them. Our Christian faith is put to the test when we come face to face with people who have hurt us or whom we just don't like. It is far more difficult to avoid them and love demands that we treat them as one whom God loves and respects the same as us.

We can only meet such challenges with God's help. And, believe me, God does help.