

May 29, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "No More Enemies"

Our country is young.

By historical or biblical standards we are just a baby – technically only 240 years old.

Yet we are strong. We are powerful.

Today is Memorial Day.

A day set aside to honor American citizens who gave their life for our country.

After the civil war that lasted from 1861-1865, the country felt a need to honor the half a million soldiers who had died in combat.

Another half a million people also died in that war, labeled ‘casualties’ – dying non-combat deaths or missing in action.

Over one million people lost in our own country in four short years.

In less than three centuries our country has been engaged in 101 named conflicts, twelve of them being labeled ‘major.’

Just under three million lives (2,955,166)¹ have been categorized as casualties which includes: missing in action, non combatant deaths and one million lost in combat.

I find these statistics staggering.

It is overwhelming for me to think about 3 million families grieving the loss of a child.

That breaks down to 12,500 families each year of our 240 years.

It grieves me to imagine the lost potential, the broken relationships, the heartache, the pain.

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects to take in is the toll of enemy lives.

How many lives were lost in those 101 conflicts?

Who were the enemies?

Sometimes the enemies listed for one conflict are the allies listed for another.

Who are our enemies now?

This morning’s gospel reading is preceded by Jesus’ sermon on the plain in which he said: “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/number-of-us-soldiers-who-died-in-every-major-war-2014-5>.

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children of the Most High...Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful...Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you.”

Love your enemies.

How are we supposed to do this?

What does this mean?

An enemy is defined as “a person who feels hatred for, fosters harmful designs against, or engages in antagonistic activities against another; an adversary or opponent.”

How is it possible to ‘love’ someone we feel hatred for?

I think that Jesus is asking us to let love prevail.

For all those soldiers who died, I believe that their love of country was able to prevail over everything else.

They recognized the interconnectedness of their lives with the lives of their loved ones back home.

Soldiers are willing to die so that others might live.

It is the ultimate example of humility; of courage; of love.

This is what Jesus calls us to.

When we pray ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’ we acknowledge that we need God to forgive us as well as needing God’s grace to help us forgive ‘our debtors.’

Writing about forgiveness this week Michael Piazza said: “Only people who can ask for forgiveness are really able to offer forgiveness...Our capacity for forgiving is determined by the depths of our awareness of our own need for forgiveness. Our ability to be humble, honest, open, and real in prayer determines the depth to which we can know God’s mercy, grace, and forgiveness.”

Today, I honor the men and women who have given their lives for our country, but I say “No more.”

No more children sacrificed for political agendas.

No more brothers and sisters killed for global power.

No more fathers and mothers slaughtered in the name of God.

No more enemies.

I believe that Jesus means what he says when he calls us to be peacemakers.

When he tells us not to judge, not to condemn, but to love and forgive, I think he means it.

Love your enemies.

We don't need enemies to make ourselves feel powerful.

We can gain strength from compassion.

Last week as I was hiking through our beautiful, peaceful woods two images kept coming into my mind.

The first was a picture from Church World Services of Yunis, a 50-year-old mother of four who lives in the drought-plagued Mondri area of Baringo County, Kenya.

Yunis was accustomed to spending six hours each day in search of water for her family.

The picture was accompanied by an explanation that described how women and even children spend much of day seeking water.

Older siblings sometimes have to stay home from school to care for younger children while parents are away.

Too little water means poor crops and threatens livestock, leading to poverty and hunger.

And the time and energy spent searching for water are urgently needed for tending crops, caring for children and finding work that can increase the family's income.

But through the Church World Service Water for Life program, compassionate friends like you helped build an innovative, cost-effective and environmentally-sound 50,000 cubic meter water containment system, called a weir.

By capturing and storing rainwater that would otherwise run off, the weir helps raise groundwater levels, increasing water access for everyone—including Yunis.

Now that she doesn't have to search for water, Yunis spends her time cultivating maize, beans and millet.

She has enough income to keep her children in school and purchase household necessities.

Better education and better nutrition give her children new opportunities.

I know that this church donated to a similar project in Ghana before I was here.

This gift of water is a gift of life.

So much better to be friends than enemies.

By helping our brothers and sisters throughout the world build better lives, we sow seeds of peace.

The second image that was present on my hike was of 19 year old Amina Ali Nkeki, the Nigerian schoolgirl found wandering with her baby in forest after a time in captivity.

Why?

What does God see when he looks at our world?

In our reading from the Hebrew Scripture this morning we heard the dramatic tale of Elijah's standoff with the worshippers of Baal.

The passage ends with this description:

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.” Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.”

Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

This is our human story. What if Elijah, rather than killing all the people who had previously disagreed with him, had invited them to a banquet to celebrate their newfound faith?

What if he had gathered them to tell stories of God’s intervention in his life and introduced them to the concept of grace?

Why do we think we need to eliminate those who disagree with us or those whose lifestyle or faith traditions differ from our own?

I believe that God’s heart is broken by the human condition.

I am in absolute awe that our Creator continues to sustain us.

I pray that every soldier throughout the world, every brother and sister of ours in the beloved community who has given their life in our wars has a place at the heavenly banquet.

I pray that their walk through the valley of death has landed them in a place of green grass and still waters where goodness and mercy have followed them – for all of eternity.

I pray that we will see peace in our lifetime so that three million Americans have not died in vain.