

Saying *No!* to Hatred: On Not Relinquishing the Privilege of Loving

A story is told about a rabbi whose disciple, in a burst of emotion, said, "My master; I love you!"

The old master looked up from the text he was studying, and asked, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

The young disciple, perplexed by the response, asked "Why do you confuse me with your irrelevant question?"

"If you do not know what hurts me," replied the rabbi, "how can you truly love me?"

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Where do we look for a glimpse of what we are called to as human beings, for an intimation of the love we are capable of and can aspire to?

In our political life, we often find our highest aspirations for the common good reduced to the lowest common denominator. Our media-soaked culture, too, regularly fails us in offering a coherent vision of humanity capable of uniting without dominating.

Perhaps this has always been the challenge facing persons of faith and conscience. The Gospels certainly portray people asking similar questions. "Rabbi, what must I do to be sure of eternal life?" Very often, the inquirers sincerely believed they already knew -- and fulfilled -- the answer.

Yet in so many places, Jesus witnessed human hearts shriveling because of exclusion and ostracism, received or enacted. And the icy glare of hatred in the eyes of those unable to face their own fears.

From his childhood days, Jesus, too, knew first-hand the pain of exclusion and discrimination.¹ He lived with suspicion and judgment about his place in his small Galilean village -- and we can be certain that it wounded him. Yet, the marvel is that this same struggle became the place where Jesus encountered God's unconditional love and acceptance of him: "*You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.*"

This love and acceptance made it possible for Jesus' heart not to shrivel, but to open and welcome. It revolutionized his ability to encounter others -- especially the poor, the outcast, the suffering -- as the worthy, beloved human beings they are in God's eyes.

When confronted with persons shut out by the walls of prejudice and fear, Jesus must have reached deep into his own life to find there a way of understanding their suffering

and hope. His certainty of God's absolute love for him gave him the strength and courage to enact that love with others. He unshriveled the human hearts he touched.

When asked, "Rabbi, what must I do to be sure of eternal life?" Jesus invites his hearers to learn something new about themselves and others, by stepping into a story about a man robbed, beaten, and left for dead.

We too enter into this scene. What are *our* fears, *our* feelings, *our* judgments, *our* responses? Where do we look for a glimpse of what we are called to, a revelation of what we are capable of?

The priest and levite in us reduce our aspirations for the common good to the lowest common denominator of self-interest. It is only the Samaritan who undertakes to understand the suffering of the beaten man, and recognize this "other" as "flesh of my flesh."

"Who *made himself* neighbor to the bandits' victim?" Jesus asked. Only the one willing to overcome barriers, break down divisions, and enter into the suffering and yearnings of the other.

It is this Samaritan, himself a despised outsider, whom Jesus offers to us as a model of the love of which we are capable. Clearly, love, for Jesus, was not an attitude of general tolerance, as it has been portrayed in romanticized versions of Christianity, but the power of divine creativity released in human relations."²

"If you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?" Discrimination and prejudice hurt. Hatred and disrespect humiliate, hurt, and sometimes kill. We tragically and regularly witness the face of hatred and suspicion, demeaning the humanity and dignity of our brothers and sisters because of their sexual orientation, race, or religion. Not only our hearts, but our towns, state, and nation begin to shrivel whenever the voices of hatred and prejudice are allowed the last word. Our task is to speak clearly our *No!* to hatred.

In a Christmas sermon in 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We must never let up in our determination to remove every vestige of segregation and discrimination from our nation, but we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege to love. I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I've seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizens' councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South, to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear."³

In saying *No!* to hatred, our task is to *make ourselves neighbor*. And we know that in this culture so afraid of difference, becoming neighbor must first be a process of humble learning -- a conversion toward *the sacrament of the neighbor* -- by entering into that holy silence in which we recognize each man and woman as an unrepeatable and necessary part of God's handiwork.

"The rare moment," the naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch once wrote, is not the moment when we decide there is something worth looking at, but "the moment when we are capable of seeing."⁴

¹ Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus, An Intimate Biography: The Jewish Life and Teaching That Inspired Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 3-22.

² *ibid.*, 134.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Christmas Sermon on Peace." In James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986) 256.

⁴ Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Desert Year." In Kenneth T. Lawrence et al. (eds.), *Imaging the Word, Volume 1* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1994) 78.

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