

Why?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, November 7, 2010: All Saints' Sunday
Based on Luke 20:27-38.*

I wonder how many of you have either been parents or have been children? Since that seems to cover us all, I wonder if you remember what I would call the “why sequences?”—those insistent dialogues that form some of the music between parents and children in every time and place. For example, “Mommy or Daddy, why do we go to church?” Well, we go to pray to God. Why? Because God made us and loves us. Why? Well, so we wouldn't be alone. Why? Because love is the thing that we want and we need and because we can give love. Why? Because we're made that way. We need to give. That's all. Then *why* is church so boring? Don't ask me why all the time!”

You know how it goes. Anyway, in that little dialogue there are probably ten sermons, and you'll be relieved to know that I am not going to preach any of them.

This is a festive day, All Saints Day. And it is a day when we're baptizing a group of children. So I propose a different angle on the “why go to church?” question. I would simply tell your child or yourself—and this is an answer that gets filled in over the ages—we go to church to find Jesus.

Of course, there are a lot of other legitimate reasons to go to church, and there are certainly a lot of legitimate reasons to have your child baptized. But at the end of the day, most of them—maybe all of them—fall away and leave this one standing, staring at us. *We go to find Jesus*

because we claim to follow generation after generation, 2000 years worth of people who have been trying to find the Jesus that the first Christians actually knew and heard.

And we are baptized in his name because we've come to know, because we've heard from others who've heard from others, that that man changed lives and changed the course of history. Out of all the options that we could choose for ourselves and our children, we choose this one. We choose, as it were, to be branded with his brand.

Now theologians call that the “scandal of particularity.” Because we baptize in a world in which we not only know there are choices, but we know a great deal about more choices, conceivably, than anyone has ever known.

So let's take that where it goes. Let's be particular. And what is so particular about Jesus? What is so unique? What can we verify is without parallel in the world—enough that we would make this choice? In other words, what's at the absolute heart of what he said and taught and died for?

Just this—and wonder of wonders, it's right in the middle of today's gospel: “*Love your enemies.*”

Make a list of all the things that we can reasonably assume Jesus actually said, things faithfully recorded, interpreted, carried in the Gospels in the New Testament down to this time. You would be hard pressed to find anything more reliably from the lips of Jesus than these three words,

“Love your enemies.”

One presumption of good scholarship is the more outrageous, the harder, the tougher the words are, the more likely it is something that Jesus himself said.

Love your enemies. These words can change your life if you knew how to practice them. Let's admit that these are perhaps the hardest words to practice.

But I'm jumping on these words again because if you were to find a representation of the greatest scholars of the New Testament around the world, lock them in a room where you could assure them of their safety and said, "What do you think is the most important thing Jesus ever said?" I am confident that a large majority would say, "Love your enemies."

Now you are bringing a beautiful child, you want to incorporate that child into a community that wants the child to have the identity that you have. "Love your enemies" may seem like a jarring welcome. Almost anything of the Christian gospel measured against the sweetness, the beauty, the vulnerability of the child is jarring.

"Love your enemies."

You're thinking: I am going to bring up this child to learn to love her enemies. I'll do what I have to, to find the support, the perspective, the emotional fortitude, the practice so that my little boy will learn in the playground, in his family, in his office to *love his enemies*.

Jesus didn't say, "Come and join me in a faith that if you do what I say, you'll learn to be good, or that you'll succeed or that you'll be rich." — though these are claims that preachers in various times and places have made in the name of Jesus.

It is not a faith that says, "Join this faith and you'll get into heaven."

It is not a faith, may I mention, that says, "Join this faith and you'll get into the best preschool in New York." Join this faith, get into that preschool, get into Harvard. I will have done my job as a parent, thank you.

No, what these parents and godparents are about to promise in the name of their child is to follow the teachings of one who *began* to change everything—the change is underway, it is not yet here, in case you haven't noticed. Jesus is the one who ushered in the bare beginning of a very long process of remaking the way the human family lives. He called it the "Kingdom of God," and it

will be based on this bedrock, radical teaching, "Love your enemies."

Such hard words.

Just in case the crowds didn't get what he was saying, according to Luke and his sources, Jesus added a few specifics, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, pray for those who abuse you," and then famously—because this is something that has attached itself to Christianity down through the ages, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one also."

And then this list of examples ends with these words, that I think parents will be happy to hear, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Jesus himself probably didn't say that; he didn't have the reputation of repeating common things others had said. If he said it at all, it was just to say, "You've heard this for a long time and if you want to do this, if you want others to treat you the way you want to be treated, you better learn to love your enemies."

As in some of his other teachings, Jesus—in this phrase—was radically intensifying some of the wisdom that other ages and other teachers had already given. And you can't get more intense than "Love your enemies."

And that other cheek business? Most people in Jesus' time were subject to search without warrant and often to instant abuse instead of protection from the law and those in authority. Striking someone who was deemed to be of a lower class with the back of the hand was used to assert authority and dominance. That's the context of: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also." The strike was a slap rendered to the right cheek by the right hand.

Another rule in that society held that the left hand was reserved for all the nasty things. You didn't use it, honorably, to strike another's cheek.

Thus, to "turn the other cheek" is to invite the person to violate the law, to go beyond the sanctioned abuse to something that was simply not allowed, a left handed strike—something that was simply not done. And in turn that means that the advice to turn the other cheek is one step on the road to learning that huge truth

that you need to love your enemies. Turning the other cheek engages the enemy.

You may have heard about the concept, in automobile driving, of turning in the direction of the skid. If you're losing traction and control, the safe maneuver to turn *with* the skid. And assuming you're not on an eight-lane highway at the time, you'll make a perfect circle, you'll maintain control of the car, and you won't wipe out.

It's so counterintuitive to turn in the direction of the skid. And so, in human relationships, is what Jesus meant about turning the other cheek. You actually hand the power to the person who is trying to assert it—and he or she has to live with it. In other words, you engage in the beginning of a dialog in which you and the person out to violate your rights, or your person, has to stay similarly engaged.

It's a direct challenge to the dominator who can't now walk away free. It's a way of saying—and this is at the heart of the very life and teaching of Jesus— that if people take one another seriously enough to say, "You have power, I acknowledge it, where do we go from here?"

To turn the cheek is a belief in something more than just getting along. It's engaging in conflict as a way of working through conflict. is the key to human relationships and to the peace and justice and prosperity on earth that was all part of that promise of becoming the kingdom.

It takes real faith to approach life this way. We aren't baptizing a little group of Biblical literalists today, so don't get down in the weeds of all of these little things. Just realize that when Jesus said, "Love your enemies," he was talking about the normal prudence that you take to protect yourself or protect those who love you—the post 9/11 world, if you will.

Remember: In these hard words—*love your enemies*—Jesus was not talking about the details, but about the horizon. What might the world look like if you and I and others learn to see that horizon, and start to see what it means to *love your enemies*.

In other words, it takes us back to that why sequence.

"Why do we go to church, Mommy and Daddy, if it's so boring?"

To hear the voice of Jesus that above all—and beneath all—that we are to love our enemies.

Why?

Because he had some hard things to say about how you learn to love. That he loved that way. And he bet his life that we could too.

When you see these lovely children and their faithful parents, poised now to be baptized, pray that they can too.

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