

**CONVERT YOUR ENEMIES**  
**Matthew 5: 43-48 --Ordination-Installation Sunday --January 15, 2017**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

I remember a picture in the Observer Report here in Washington and it is of a march up main street and Dr. Bill Rusch, Pastor of The Church of the Covenant and several other leaders in our community including Lew Waller, are marching up the street side by side and arm in arm. It was back in the 1960's when our country was in turmoil about many things, but the anger and the divisions ran deep, and it felt as if the entire nation were about to explode. Even as a young man amid all the assassinations, riots and tumult of the time I knew that something felt wrong. In preparation for this sermon today I have recently re-read two books on that era, both by Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire* and *Parting the Waters*. As I read these books I had the feeling as a nation we are again poised for times of tumult. I was having a "deva vu experience" all over again. It felt like we've been here before. So what did we learn from that time back in the 60's? What can we employ from that time to help us in this time?

I think one of my observations is that The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, whose holiday we celebrate tomorrow, and specifically the methodology he chose to employ, was particularly the reason why our country did not explode and collapse into internal civil war. We have been together as a nation and have the hope of remaining together as a nation, specifically because of Christian principles which he deliberately chose to follow, even and especially when he was tempted, and had every right, to do otherwise. He chose non-violent resistance. Ah, but at the heart of his teaching and preaching were Jesus' words in the Sermon on Mount, Jesus says: "*But I say to you, love your enemies...*" (Matthew 5: 44) King's methodology was not to crush and destroy his enemies but it was to CONVERT them. The means to his end was not to beat them from the outside it was to change their heart from the inside. The battle was not an external battle of countervailing forces as much as it was an internal battle waged within the human heart. And when he was subjected to beatings or incarcerated in jail unjustly, when in humility he was subjected to every indignity, it was through this that he won over the hearts of the American people, and America was changed, and our inherent goodness was brought forth, and we stepped back from the precipice of anger and hatred and malice and division and sought again to become "One Nation Under God".

I recently attended a dinner party where several people were very angry at the current situation in the country. They were going to march and they were very angry. They were largely secular people, young and highly educated, and they were angry. They had pretty much told me that religion and particularly Christianity was responsible for most of the world's ills. I watched a sequencing, a progression of a pattern that I have noticed recently in our country; the pattern applies to any side in any political debate. It occurs in condo association meetings and it occurs in school board meetings. It is rife pretty much everywhere in our society right now. First, people disagree. Then, they move the disagreement to the personal level. They engage in what I was taught in debate you must never do, engage in "ad hominin" attacks –you attack the person not their viewpoints. Then, as you disparage and disrespect, not only their ideas, but also who they are, you move to believe that they are evil. Their motivation for what they believe isn't just wrong but it is evil. I call it you "demonize" people with which you disagree. And once you demonize someone, once they become a "they" instead of an individual person, then you feel you have the right to say anything about them and to treat them however badly you choose and believe all manner of negative things about them. Indeed, you have the right to treat people inhumanely and stomp them into the dirt, because you have demonized them and believe they are evil. In contrast, Jesus says, "*You have heard it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, (quoting from Leviticus), But I say to you (Jesus says to us) love your enemies, bless those who curse you,*

*do good to those who hate you, and pray for those...who persecute you.” (Matthew 5: 43-44)* This lies right at the very heart of Jesus’ ethic, of the way Jesus asks us to transform our world, of the way true spiritual transformation will come. Not by the sword, but by love. Not by crushing an enemy but by praying for them. Not by retaliating in kind, but in kindly responding. Not by cursing but by blessing. You must really love Jesus and really understand how different this ethic is from our world in order to be able to LOVE OUR ENEMIES. Because Jesus’ goal is not to destroy His enemies, it is to convert them. He has come not to bring death and division; He has come to bring life. It is not the battling of two countervailing positions; He is for the transformation of our society and world through HIM. There is no holy end with an unholy means. The two—the end and the means—must be one in the same. The way you get there is just as important as the destination. Love is the destination and love is the means to achieve that destination. So this group of young, angry people, who rejected religion and the church and Christianity, I was able to remind them of the 1960’s and I was able to share with them this man whom they had forgotten, Martin Luther King, and I was able to speak to them about the power of love to transform and not to kill, and then I said –“You see, really America has been always based on Christianity. It has been reformed and revived by Christianity. Its principles and why it is still together as a nation is because of Christianity. You need to decide whether you will hate or whether you will love. And you need to figure out where the source of that love comes from.”

When Martin Luther King sat in a Birmingham jail and chose to love Bull Connor, the man who was particularly responsible for persecuting him, it was the beginning of transformation. When Jesus hung on a cross and shouted, “Father forgive them (the very people who nailed him to the cross) they know not what they do”, it is the source of our spiritual transformation. When you choose to walk away from that person who has wronged you and you choose to forgive them and you choose to love them, then that is the beginning of their conversion to the love of Jesus. We are again hurling willy-nilly toward the precipice of anger, division and tumult. But re-finding the love of Jesus as the core of the ethic of our society again, is the beginning of restoration and rebirth and renewal and creating a society that is whole and just and loving. It comes from Jesus. It comes from the love of God. It comes from the church. It begins with us. Elders and deacons, you’re spiritual leaders following the Master; it makes a difference who you are, and the Savior you serve, and the way you choose to conduct yourself, not just here but out in the world. There is no good end that flows from an unworthy means. No good fruit ever produced by a poisonous tree. Serve with the love of Jesus aflame in your heart. Love is the goal and love is His standard and love is the end and love is the means. That’s what Jesus taught us at the cross.

I end with one of my favorite quotes from King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail”. He writes: “Let us all hope...the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.” Jesus says: “But I say to you, love your enemies...that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” O Washington, may we ever march together, side by side and arm in arm, with the flame of the love of Jesus alive in our hearts. It would so please the Master. Amen and Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*