

The Secret History of Our Enemies
Sermon – November 15, 2020
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Dr. William W. Rich – Vicar

What a year we have been through, you and I, together with our fellow parishioners, fellow Bostonians, and the rest of the world. None of us could have imagined as we approached Thanksgiving 2019 that the year 2020 would present such challenges, or so many troubles and traumas, fears and anxieties, stresses and strains. But here we are eight months since the pandemic shut down life as we knew it. We have survived, and that is worth thanking God for.

In times like this, all of us – of every political stripe, socio-economic class, race, gender, or orientation – every single one of us experiences life-changing traumas. But though each of us shares these traumas, there are a variety of ways our souls can handle the hurt. Three different ways, it seems to me. It is as if each of us stands at a crossroads in times like this, with three roads leading out in three different directions. Three possible responses, and the very different roads down which our chosen response leads us.

One road, one possible response to trauma is to become angry, and project blame and vitriol outward on any and all we meet along the way, or who come within range of us along the way. As the psalm for today reminds us: this sort of angry response leads into a spiral of scorn, derision, and contempt, blaming anyone and everyone, and proudly standing apart from the hurts of others, with virtually no mercy, no compassion for anyone else's hurts. I call this response: splattering.

There is a second road, and another way to respond in times of trauma. When taking this path, it is as if a soul chooses to withdraw into a cave – no sunlight, no rain - licking the soul's wounds, and sinking into depression, or even outright despair, with anxieties and fears becoming a dark cloud that surrounds the heart, and clouds the eyes, blocking the way out into life. I call this response: shuttering.

Neither of these two roads leads the soul to a healthy place. The two roads are alike in that they isolate; they work against community. They close others out. The one who splatters closes others out by pushing them away. The one who shuttering closes others out by shutting one's soul away. The one who splatters, and the one

who shutters: neither creates a living garden, a community of life, and love, of faith and trust, and hope. Any tree that tries to grow along either of these ways does not thrive. It dries and withers, and eventually dies, cut off as it is from the lifegiving community that comes from interlaced roots, and the shared stream of underground water: the fountain of life.

A soul that splatters or a soul shuttered is the opposite of the thriving soul, imaged in Psalm 1 as an evergreen, drawing water from the Divine Aquifer of love that is ever watering its roots, all the while absorbing the noxious elements that poison the environment, and sending out in place of those poisons a lifegiving breath, the divine spirit whose wind freshens the community of all living beings nearby.

Though all of us wish that our souls responded to trauma like the evergreen of Psalm 1, the sad fact is that all too often our souls either splatter all over others, or shutter themselves away. But there is hope, thanks be to God. As Paul put it, there is a more excellent way to respond to trauma than either the way of splattering or shuttering. That is the way of love, the way of agape. The agape love that Jesus speaks about in today's reading from John's Gospel. This love does not leave us orphaned, like a soul shuttered and cut off from the lifegiving stream of God. This agape love does not return splattering for splattering. For the Jesus who offers us this love is the one, who the day after he speaks these words, chooses to offer love in place of the fear that hangs him on the cross. Mercy in place of the derision that those at the foot of the cross throw in his face. Humble and courageous embrace of the world's pain and death's shadow, instead of the merciless pride of those whose indolent power shutters them, and cuts them off from any compassion for Christ or those "little ones" he came to love and lead into life.

But how do we – the ones who all-too-often splatter and shutter – how do we become more like this loving Christ, this one who is agape love – love unselfish and lifegiving – even in the face of trauma? In today's Gospel, Jesus suggests that it is only with the help of the Spirit that we can be transformed from shuttered or splattering souls to souls capable of agape love. This Spirit - here called the Advocate (in Greek, the Paraclete, which means the One called alongside) - this Advocate is our soul's Companion, the One who strengthens each soul by sharing with us the wind and breath that is the very life of the Spirit.

And how does this one whom God calls alongside us as Companion do the work of transformation? For be sure of this, it is work. Hard work. Not indolence. But work. But we need not be scared to death of this work. Because the Companioning Spirit will not leave us orphaned to learn how to do the work of agape love all by ourselves. This Spirit, this Companion, will link us into the stream of the love that flows between the Father and the Son, so that we can flow in that stream with them, and not be shuttered away or orphaned, trying to do the work of love all alone.

What does this learning to love look like? And how does trauma play a part in the soul's learning to love? Perhaps one man's life story, touched deeply by trauma, can help us to learn how love – agape love, true compassion – can grow out of the soul's pain.

His name was Henry. He lived much of his life not far from here, just across the river in Cambridge. He was fated to have to bear with lifelong neuralgia that wracked his body with constant pain. His eyesight was poor, and further strained his life as a scholar and writer. He married his childhood sweetheart when he was only twenty-four, and a few years later as they awaited the birth of their first child, his wife miscarried and shortly thereafter died from the complications of losing the child. As he mourned that loss, he fell in love with a proud and wealthy woman, who put off his importunings of love for seven long years, before finally agreeing to marry him. Their love was graced with six children. But the joy they shared was overshadowed by the deep divisions between their own abolitionist activism and the slaveholding sentiments of so many of their fellow citizens.

And then death came again into Henry's life, as he wept over the deaths on the fields of the Civil War, and wept more mightily still over the death of his second wife, burned to death in their house, as her dress caught on fire one summer day while he napped. He tried to save her, using a rug and his own body to smother the fire, but to no avail. He himself was so badly burned that he could not attend her funeral, and ever after wore a beard to hide the facial scars left by the fire.

Henry never fully recovered from his grief, and said years later, that in the midst of his depression and panic attacks he felt he was inwardly bleeding to death. But despite his trauma, he never shuttered himself away from the world, and in fact drew a circle of other writers close about him, who helped support him in his grief,

and helped him transform that grief through his writing. Nor did he ever take the road of splattering others with his pain. In fact, one of the writer's in Henry's circle said, at Henry's funeral, that Henry maintained – despite his pain – “an absolute sweetness, simplicity, and modesty”* despite the fame that grew up around him and his poetry as he aged. He did not sink into his own pain - he did not become a shuttered soul. Nor did he splatter his pain, projecting out onto those around him the public pains his nation experienced during its Civil War. Somehow, instead of blaming those of the South, Henry, the abolitionist Northerner found himself graced with a soul that could say, in one of his most famous sayings, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each [person's] life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow became for those around him an evergreen tree. His pain and depression was transmuted into lifegiving poetry that gave life not only to the poet himself, but also to the community of millions in this country and around the world who were also solaced and strengthened in their own griefs and traumas by Longfellow's words. Following in the path of Christ himself, whose grief and trauma was absorbed and transformed into agape, Longfellow took into himself the pains of his personal life, and the social pains of his nation wracked by warring factions, and races unreconciled. Like the evergreen tree of Psalm 1, this poet absorbed the poisons that permeated his personal life, and the traumas that scarred his nation, and let the Spirit – the poetic muse God had given him – transform those personal and public pains into words that lamented the pain while holding onto hope.

At Christmas 1863, just eighteen months after the death of his second wife, he wrote a poem that became the basis of the Christmas Hymn “I heard the bells on Christmas Day.” Let us, with the pains personal and public of 2020, hear and absorb that hymn's words. And let its words transmute our pain into hope, and lead us from shuttered souls or splattering ones, to souls made more compassionate by the pains we share in communion with all our fellow sufferers, and the agape that can come when pain is shared.

Christmas Bells – Christmas 1863

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow - 1807-1882

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
 And wild and sweet
 The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
 Had rolled along
 The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
 A voice, a chime,
 A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
 And with the sound
 The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
 And made forlorn
 The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
 "For hate is strong,
 And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

May it be so! Amen.

*James Russell Lowell