

Text: Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything except to love one another.

HATE SELLS, BUT LOVE SAVES

Many years ago, I was a member of a graduate seminar on personality theory taught by a psychiatrist. He told the story of having the court appoint his wife and himself as the temporary guardians of a very badly abused and traumatized child. The five-year-old didn't speak, could not tolerate touching anyone or have anyone touching him and made no eye contact. The withdrawal was almost total. During the second week of his stay, one night he defecated outside the bedroom door of the psychiatrist and his wife. The wife was none too pleased, but her husband, after cleaning up the mess, told her that that "mess", was the first deliberate interaction with the child and was a gift from the child, actually, from the child's perspective, the only safe gift he possessed. Within a few days the child began to speak, to make eye contact and, after another week, even allowed himself to be held. The teaching point of the story was that context and perspective were all important in understanding behavior. Excrement or gift: Well, it all depends.

When I am exposed to hateful speech my first reaction is to give a rebuttal that is personal, pointed and viscous. That kind of response is not one of my better attributes. It also accomplishes nothing but to escalate the situation. What if I reined in my disgust and my tongue and took a different tack – maybe a Jesus tack. Graced with Jesus love, what if I viewed hate as a plea for understanding and help? Context and perspective; it allowed Jesus to sit down to eat with tax collectors and sex workers, perhaps I could at least try to understand the hate monger. Maybe in our ministry of reconciliation the church, individually and corporately, could seek to pierce hatred with love to produce short-term understanding and long-term change.

James Baldwin wrote: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain." Let us look at some of the common hates the Church is dealing with and try to understand the underlying factors that might be producing pain in those who use hate as a pain reliver.

EAT: EXPERTISE, AUTHORITY, TRUTH: Our society has large segments that have rejected the role of expertise, authority and truth in ordinary and civic discourse. This may be the hate that is the key to understanding all other hates. In a complex society ignorance is the norm. It makes no difference how bright or educated you are, your ignorance is going to be far greater than your knowledge. We are very dependent on expertise. When expertise has wide applicability, we then create authority structures to make sure that the experts meet certain standards. Most of us have enough confidence in this system so that we ride elevators and airplanes without challenging the expertise of the engineers and pilots in whom we are placing our trust. In many facets of our lives this process produces truth, with a little t. If only a few people refuse to accept the various "truths" that the system creates, little harm is done. The members of the flat earth society cause few social problems and, so far as I know, no fatalities by people walking to death trying to get to the earth's edge! In other instances, like pandemics, the refusal to acknowledge expertise causes tremendous loss of life.

Why do people reject science and the role of experts in our society? There are probably numerous answers, but one cause that creates pain is living with ambiguity – with uncertainty – with multiple causation. Many people long to hear that when you do A, B follows. If that relationship can be presented forcefully and often, people will believe it. An unambiguous lie is preferred by many people

over a truth that is hedged about with the realities of a situation: Realities that are often complex, inter-related and difficult to understand.

Now, what would Jesus do? There are some guesses that we might make based on the Gospels. He would tell the troubled person that no matter what you do, you are loved by God, who will forgive you an infinite number of times. He might also create a safe place for the confused by telling them that they don't have to know everything – knowing love is enough. Jesus would also likely say that although I am bringing about radical change, you can find strength enough to cope with what you don't fully understand by remembering that God is the constant in your life. The phrase from the Baptism ceremony comes to mind: All kinds of things may be accomplished, "With God's help."

Now, what should we do? We make sure that the hater knows that we may disagree with his hate and may vigorously take action against it, but we still love the child of God, hiding within the hateful person. We might show, through our own actions, that living with uncertainty and accepting the expertise of others is not a sign of personal weakness or a rejection of Biblical authority. We can, with love, not with superiority, educate people wherever we find them.

We can, with God's help, apply the same technique to gender issues and to toxic masculinity, to systemic racism and to other social issues that have become hate charged. What are the underlying fears of the haters and how might we help allay those fears is the task of every person who calls on Jesus' name. Amen.

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