

Preacher, Rev. Glenn Johnson

People I Love to Hate; People I Hate to Love

June 27, 2004

Have you ever embarked on a mission that you thought would be simple, only to find after you began that it was much more difficult than you had expected? Many months ago, I stumbled across the phrase that is the title of today's remarks. It struck me forcefully, and I resolved someday to use it as a foundation for some shared thoughts. My ignorance led me to think that it would be an easy sermon to flesh out....but boy, was I wrong! Like so many other topics, this one has caused me to wrestle with exactly what I mean and what I want to say.

I started to name names, but stopped because the list had become too long and was nowhere near completion. That leads to an observation that is also a confession: all of us have many acquaintances or people we know about whom we love to hate, and others whom we hate to love.

As I thought more, it seemed to be simplest to list broad classifications of people, so I propose to share with you today some of the broad types of humanity that I think qualify. This sort of summarization, of course, is dangerously simplistic and shallow, but it will have to suffice. I also confess that these are intensely personal.

Before I list my groupings, I invite you to think about the subject. What types of persons do you love to hate?

Many of the people who fit into these summary classifications remind us of Oscar Wilde's observation: "Some people cause happiness wherever they go; others whenever they go." That remark fits the people I love to hate, and the ones I hate to love.

I also quickly found that, for me, it is much more productive to concentrate on those whom I love to hate than on those whom I hate to love. I don't know why that is. Am I so negative by nature? Is it just that I tend, like most folks, to move to the easiest path? Why, I wonder, is it the easiest? Is "loving" so much more difficult than "hating" that I just gravitate lazily to the latter? Very likely, but let me turn to the kinds of people whom I love to hate.

My thoughts about these folks are grouped into four big sections.

The first bunch that I love to hate are all those who abuse anyone or anything. Those who kick a puppy, and those who abuse a loved one or one with whose care they are charged; those who abuse our world – and us – by dumping trash in it or stripping its forests, those who abuse themselves by drugs or by diet, either over- or under-eating. Those who abuse their authority or their wealth or their power, whether they are clerics or political leaders or successful businesspersons. I love to hate all persons who abuse anyone or anything. They qualify for Irving S. Cobb's tart comment about an acquaintance: "I have just learned of his illness. Let's hope it is nothing trivial."

A second group that I love to hate is all of those who are arrogantly certain of their rightness - all of the cocksure fundamentalists in our world, religious and political and ethical. We have seen America's present leaders charged with hubris. The Taliban also qualifies for my list, as do Pope John Paul II and Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention's leadership. Phrased another way, I love to hate people who lack humility. Such persons have an overbearing conceit, and they remind me of Twain's description: "he looked like he was waiting for a vacancy in the Trinity."

The third bunch is those who settle for less than their best, who waste their potential, whether from laziness or from ignorance. I love to hate these people because, in a very real sense, they cheat you and me. Cheat us out of the contributions they could make to society if they worked and learned and earned and improved the world about them. I thought about consigning them into a group I would merely disdain, but decided that no, I love to hate them in a broader and more comprehensive sense.

A fourth group I love to hate is those who have extremely materialistic values, those who prize form over substance, those who are acquisitive or selfish, those who are politically correct....those who are overly fashion- and fad-conscious.

You probably know that the wisdom of the Buddha has been distilled into the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering. The Second Noble Truth is the truth of the cause of suffering....which is craving, acquisitiveness, wanting more than one needs.....what we in the Christian tradition know as the cardinal sin of Avarice. People in this category often proclaim the virtue of free enterprise and of the capitalist system, but use both in extreme and wrong ways. Too much of America falls into this group willingly, and too many more fall into it by default. Jesus was emphatically not a capitalist.

So those are the groups of people I love to hate:

Those who abuse.

Those who are arrogant

Those who accept less than their best.

Those who are acquisitive or who crave more than they need.

You may well have thought of other categories; I hope you have. It is true that part of the reason for my loving to hate them is that they serve as ever-present reminders of my own shortcomings.

However, when I turn to a consideration of those whom I hate to love, my task turns tedious....principally because my culture and my faith tradition tell me that I should love everyone. It is at least a wee bit uncomfortable and certainly unflattering to admit that I love to hate ANYone.....but I would be dishonest with you if I said that I did not.

Of course, as you know well, there are only tiny shades of difference between love and hate. In many observers' eyes, they are but variations of the same thing – intense feeling. But I don't want to seek refuge from a sense of being wrong in that sort of semantic silliness.

When I set out to enumerate the categories of the people I hate to love, I found that I could use the same groupings that were mentioned earlier. I really do hate to love, just as much as I love to hate, people who abuse, or are overly certain of their intellectual positions, or who waste their potential, or are materialistic. But ancient Hebrew wisdom and the ethic of Jesus call constantly and clearly for us to love unabashedly, to love without hesitation and with no conditions. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In other words, don't just love those whom you pity or those whom you admire. Love also those who disdain your very existence. Yes, love Southern Baptists of all stripes. Love the Baathists and supporters of al-Quida. Love especially those who beat their children and spouses and those who pollute our air or sniff cocaine up their nostrils or take perverted comfort in the forgetfulness of an alcoholic stupor. Love Bill James and Ruth Samuelson. Love Rush Limbaugh and Billy Graham.

We find it most difficult to love those whom we don't know or understand, those who are different from us I hate to love those who refuse to challenge their own faith understanding, those who refuse to confront their doubts, or those who accept without question the statements of some authority figure. I hate to love those who resort to easy answers to life's big questions, rather than admitting that they simply do not know if, indeed, they do not. I hate to love those who accept without question orthodoxy and convention and arbitrary rules of behavior, because they deprive themselves and others of the power of their willingness to expose wrong.

What then do we make of the clear instruction: Love your neighbor, when we have so many types of persons whom we hate to love? Why did our Old Testament and New Testament each record that simple phrase, and underscore it for emphasis? Because it is believed to be the best way for all human beings to live. Because it's the most pragmatic way for you, and me, to coexist with 6 billion other persons on our planet. Because it is incredibly simple, yet ultimately practical, advice for living in community. It is ancient wisdom, stressed as one of two laws, equal in importance, and appropriate for all, even for those of us who can name people we love to hate and people we hate to love. It's time to get about practicing it, and it can....no, it MUST.....begin with us.

(Final hymn)

We may be too Baptist, and not be Jewish enough, to know much about Rabbi Hillel, who was a well-known contemporary of Jesus, but he is worthy of our knowing him. He was born in Babylon and was a seeker of understanding who moved his family to Jerusalem to study Torah. His pithy aphorisms may have been, according to some scholars, the foundation of our New Testament text this morning. In other words, the writers of the gospels may have plagiarized. Be that as it may, I will close with Rabbi Hillel's most famous saying, and offer it as our benediction.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Other sayings from Rabbi Hillel:

Do not judge your neighbor

until you are in your neighbor's place.

Do not say, "When I have time I will study."

Perhaps you will never have time.

In a place where there are no leaders,

try to be a leader.

Do not separate yourself from your community.

A shy person cannot learn.

An ignorant person cannot be pious.