

“Love and Hate”

A Homily by Stephen Martz for the Children of St. Nicholas

14 October 2007

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 + Psalm 66 + 2 Timothy 2:8-15 + Luke 17:11-19

One of the best parts of being a child is that you have not yet learned to hate. Okay, I know what it's like to be five years old and be told *No* and to respond loudly, *I hate you!* (I also remember what it's like to be the parent of a five year old who is told *No* and responds emphatically, *I hate you!*)

But that's not the kind of hate I'm talking about. This kind of hate is something most human beings don't learn or feel until we grow older.

Today's story about Jesus and the ten lepers is at bottom a story about love and hate. The Jews and Samaritans really hated each other.

That's kind of hard for us to understand today. We know they were related to one another and both worshipped the same God. The Jews had a temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem, the Samaritans had their Yahweh temple on Mt. Gerizim. Why the enmity?

Well, history tells us that the Jews did not regard their relatives who lived in Samaria as true Israelites because they had married non-Jews. And we know the Samaritans were still really angry because when the Jewish community went to rebuild the Temple, the Samaritans were told in no uncertain terms, *No, we don't need or want your help.*

But history can never tell us all. Maybe the hatred between Jews and Samaritans was just part of the human story that goes back even beyond Cain and Abel; in this story, the people we hate the most are the ones closest to us.

Anyway, there was no deeper divide in the ancient world than between Jews and Samaritans. Even Jesus was affected by the hatred. Once, he and his disciples tried to stop for rest in a Samaritan village, but the people turned them away.

But Jesus is not a hater. He always meets hatred with love, and in Luke's gospel, we meet two Samaritans who do, too. One, of course, is the famous Good Samaritan. Remember him?

He's the guy who stopped to help a man who had been beaten up and left for dead by robbers. He stopped after two different Jews had passed by the man without helping him – and he was a Samaritan while the man left for dead was a Jew.

The other good Samaritan Luke tells us about is the thankful leper we meet today. Having leprosy in Jesus' day was really hard. Everyone thought it was very contagious. So as soon as you got it, you were kicked out of your family and village. You had to wander with other lepers far away from healthy people.

You could never again come into your village or any other village. If you were lucky, some people would take pity on you and leave food or other provisions at the outskirts of the village. But if people approached you when you went to pick it up, you had to shout, *Unclean! Unclean!* And they would retreat.

How would you feel if you could never come near your family or friends?

Lepers felt lonely and sad, didn't feel anyone loved them any more. That's why the ten lepers today came after Jesus – although they kept back the required distance. They had heard about his power, his healing and love, and they hoped he could help them. So they shouted, *Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*

Jesus, as a Jew, and the thankful leper, as a Samaritan, were supposed to hate each other. That's just the way it was. *Yuk, I hate you! I don't want to be like you! I don't want to come near you! Yucky! Icky! Yuk!*

But Jesus and the thankful leper were different. They never learned to hate. They felt different feelings, feelings like mercy, pity, and thankfulness. When you feel those kinds of feelings, you can't hate, can you? That's because you don't see a bad Jew or a mean Samaritan or a yucky person. You see a child, a child of God.

I wonder how different the world would be if all the adults became like little children who had not yet learned to hate and saw every other person as a child of God. I think it would be a lot nicer. Maybe that's why Jesus once said that everyone had to become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of God.