

March 22, 2020

Give Up!
Give Up Enemies!
John 1:43-50

How many times have you been asked the question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" It's a good question. Many in our area do give up something for Lent because it is a Roman Catholic tradition. The idea of giving up something for Lent is based on Matthew 16:24, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*" So, giving up something for Lent is about self-denial. It's not a second chance at your broken New Year's resolution. Giving up something for Lent should be done prayerfully, so we can wholly renew ourselves in Christ. Giving up something for Lent is not a bad thing but a good thing. There are certain things that are holding us back spiritually.

This is sermon number five in this year's Lenten sermon series, *Give Up!* We are looking at things that are impeding our spiritual growth. To date, we have looked at control, darkness and arrogance. Next week, we look at greed. On Palm Sunday, we will look at popularity. On Easter, we will look at death. Today, we look at enemies. Our Gospel reading for today is John 1:43-50. Let me call this message *Give Up Enemies!*

John 1:43-50 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that."

Jesus of Nazareth once said, "*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By doing this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*" (John 13:34-35) If you have heard these words before, say, "**Amen!**"

We are in the first chapter of John. It is early in Jesus' ministry; he is still collecting his disciples. In the story prior to our reading, Jesus welcomed Andrew and his brother,

Peter. The next day, Jesus invited Philip to be one of the twelve. In verse 44 we are told the original three disciples, Andrew, Peter and Philip, were from the town of Bethsaida, a town on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Philip told Nathanael about Jesus. At first, he is not impressed. As a matter of fact, he was quite cynical. The source of his doubts came from Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. He assumed Jesus was like everyone else in Nazareth: a second-class citizen. Everyone at that time knew the truth about the citizens of Nazareth; they were a little less intelligent and less attractive than the average person. Rooted in this first-century prejudice, Nathanael says, "*Nazareth! What good can come from there?*" It wasn't until he met Jesus that his mind was changed. You know the truth. We have no problem understanding verse 46, because our society is filled with prejudiced behavior. Have you noticed our society is filled with racial tension? That tension is rooted in our prejudices. This is not an isolated case. Our prejudices have been damaging the church for a long time.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-148) wrote that during his student days, he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus, he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India. So, one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church so he could talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with "his own people". Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu." That usher's prejudice not only betrayed Jesus, but also turned a person away from trusting Him as Savior. That is an ugly story, but this is the truth. Every church struggles with their own prejudices. We are no exception.

Several weeks ago, our country celebrated Martin Luther King Day; a day to remember the life and spirit of the Civil Rights activist. It is a national holiday, and it has become my custom to give a little history on each one. Several years ago, I asked the congregation, "How long have we been celebrating Martin Luther King Day?" Do you remember what happened? One of the saints here yelled out, "Too long!" Some of our white faces giggled at that comment, and I was uncomfortable. Those two words, and our response to those two words, did more damage than we will ever know. Several days later, I found an opened letter on my desk. It was written by a woman who was visiting us that day. She told me she was relocating from the south and was looking for a church home. She was upset that in church of all places, someone would yell out such a thing. She was shocked that some thought "too long" was funny. She was appalled I didn't reprimand the congregation. She may be right. It is safe to say, she will not be back. I wonder, how many Christian people she will tell about her time with us? Every church struggles with prejudices.

When I was in college, I took several sociology classes. One of the things we looked at were our prejudices. I remember, clearly, three things about our prejudices. This is what I remember: 1.) Everyone is prejudiced. 2.) Our prejudices are learned. 3.) Our

prejudices reveal our fears. I don't pretend to be an expert on prejudiced behavior. However, I will admit it is one of my great challenges in my discipleship. I live in a white world and have very little interaction with non-white people. Everyone I know is just like me, socially, economically and politically. I struggle relating to how others live and how others think. It would be easy to ignore this topic, but I won't do it. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and the Master expects more from us. We are supposed to be a little more like Jesus every day. Jesus loved unconditionally. We love selectively. If you can agree with that, say, "**Amen!**" Let's look at those three statements.

Everyone is Prejudiced

This is sociological fact number one: everyone is prejudiced. There is not a single person in this world that escapes. Sociologists says the reason we are all prejudiced is the numbers. Did you know, the United States Census Bureau estimates the world's population is more than 7.8 billion? It's impossible to know everyone. How many people do you know? In 2013, the New York Times reported that the average American knows about 600 people. That figure seems high to me. Do you think you know 600 people? Why are those numbers important? They reveal to us why everyone is prejudiced.

Sociologists tell us everyone is prejudiced because there are so many people we do not know. With so many unknown people, we gather in groups together to gain some sense of control. It is impossible to know every individual; it's much easier to know the stereotypes of various groups. Look at the text with me. Nathanael did not know Jesus personally, but he did have some preconceived opinions about Nazarenes. The stereotype broke down once he met Jesus. Just admit it, you are prejudiced! You will always hold a certain amount of prejudice, because it's impossible to know everyone. Our prejudices fool us into believing that we have some control. If you can accept that sociological fact, say, "**Amen!**"

Our Prejudices are Learned

This is sociological fact number two: our prejudices are learned. Last Saturday morning, I had a private baptism. I enjoyed the baptism because I officiated at the baby's parent's wedding several years ago. It is nice when I can maintain a relationship with a couple beyond the wedding. Baptisms are important for two reasons. The first reason is spiritual. We deal with the original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve. The second reason is practical. The parents are promising that they will raise the child within the Christian faith. That promise is important because no one has a greater influence on the baby than their parents. If the parents make that promise with a sincere heart, then it will be life altering for the child. If the promise is made lightly, then it will have very little influence on the baby. The greatest role model in a child's life is the child's parents. Have you ever stopped to consider how much you learned from your parents?

Parents are not just biological parents; parents are role models. So, whatever you want your child to be or do, then you must be or do it. If you want your child to be hard working, then you must be hard working. If you want your child to be kind and

compassionate, then you must be kind and compassionate. If you want your child to vote, then you must vote. If you want your child to drink milk, then you must drink milk. If you want your child to be a Christian, then you must be a Christian. Being a good role model in life is so important. Our children can learn so many good things from us. The problem is, sometimes they learn negative things from us, like our negative prejudices. If you want your child to not be a prejudiced person, then you must not be a prejudiced person. Nathanael did not enter this world instinctively knowing there was something wrong with the citizens of Nazareth. It was something he learned along the way. It may or may not have been his parents. Regardless, our prejudices are learned. Would you like our world to be a better place? Then answer this question: What prejudices are you passing on to the next generation? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Our Prejudices Reveal Our Fears

This is sociological fact number three: our prejudices reveal our fears. Sociologists say the group you dislike the most, frightens you the most. I know that is true because I have seen it countless times. I have lived it. Years ago, I was out at the mall with Vlad. It was Vlad's first trip to America. You know Vlad, he was the first Russian orphan we brought to America to get prosthetic legs. He lost his legs in a Moscow rail yard jumping trains. Vlad was in his wheelchair; I sat on a bench watching people pass. Everyone looked at Vlad because they noticed his stumps. Everyone looked, but only one talked to us. The only one who talked to him was young black man, wearing a baseball cap that hung to the side. He had one gold tooth in his mouth and a gold bracelet around his neck. His oversized leather coat promoted his favorite NFL team, the Oakland Raiders. His old jeans were faded and riding low. When he started walking our way, I tried to ignore him, but it was impossible. When he started talking, his dictation was poor; I could hardly make out his words. I will admit it, I was intimidated. I thought he was going to ask me for money, so I grew defensive. I couldn't believe what he was saying. He didn't ask me for money. Instead, he wanted to know about Vlad. He wanted to know what doctor was helping him. I could not have been more surprised. He pulled out a business card and handed it to me. He said, "This is my doctor; he is the best." Then, he pulled up the legs of his faded jeans and exposed his prosthetic legs. As he walked away, he said, "If you need any help, call me, my number is on the back of the card." I have never been more ashamed of myself. I had to admit it, I am a prejudiced person. That is one of the things we have in common.

Years ago, I was sitting at Hospice House next to a man who was near the end. The disease was winning. When I arrived, I was surprised to find him alone. I was shocked that his mind was so clear. He was one of the finest men I had ever known. I knew his end was near, so I gave him ample time. We talked about many things, his family, his work, his childhood. As he laid in that bed and reviewed his life, he told me things that he had held secret for years. He told me about visiting his grandparents as a boy. Out of the blue he said, "Russ, did you know my grandparents were members of the Ku Klux Klan?" I said, "Seriously?" He said, "Yes! The group would meet at their house

because they owned several acres. I remember everyone was nice to me, but I had to leave once the ceremony started." He added, "They stored their hoods and robes in my grandparent's basement. There was a safe in that basement which held the group's treasury and a list of all the names of all the members." He was being so honest, I had to ask him the next question, "Did you ever join?" He said, "No!" I said, "Why not?" He said, "I was too young; I was just a boy." I said, "No, later. Why didn't you join when you became an adult?" He ended by saying, "Russ, by then, we all knew better." Can I ask you this question?

Do you know better, or are you holding tight to your prejudices? You may think you are making that other group look bad, but in truth, you are only damaging yourself. How foolish have you made yourself look lately? Jesus once said, *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By doing this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**