

Homily for Lenten Evening Prayer Week IV 2019
What's love got to do with us and our enemies?

In the winter when all the hardwood trees are bare, mistletoe remains green, a harbinger of Spring. Now you may be wondering why mistletoe is on my mind, so I ask you to stick with me and let me explain. You see, I recently learned some interesting things about this plant—a beloved symbol that is part of our Christmas decorating and traditions—

Although it is known for its romantic associations, mistletoe is anything but loving. In fact, mistletoe steals water and nutrients from other plants. It attaches itself plants and shrubs, and steals away its hosts food and water. The berries are toxic to humans and yet they provide nourishment to forest animals and birds during harsh winters when other food is scarce. True, mistletoe shortens the life of their host trees, but the death of those trees provides the means for the flourishing of many species of forest birds, even a few species of butterflies. Even the romantic “kissing” tradition is rooted in an ancient Norse mythology that relates that the mistletoe plant was initially used as a weapon only to become a symbol of love. In fact, an ancient Scandinavian tradition holds that if two hunters meet in the woods and find themselves standing under a tree with mistletoe growing on it, they must drop their weapons until the next day. Mistletoe is both takes life away from its host, but it also makes it possible for other life to survive, even thrive.

A mysterious plant, compelling in its loveliness
and its potential lethality.

Its not so easy to judge the goodness or the badness of this plant.

It seems to me that mistletoe is a good symbol
for the absorption we give an enemy.

We often build enemies into mythical proportions,
then lose sight of the path.

Maybe, we think, if we could control our enemies similar to the
way we treat mistletoe—cut them down, bind them,
or use them for our purpose—
maybe, just maybe, we will gain control of our lives
and have the power we believe we deserve.

Enemies draw us in,
and we tend to create myths about them to warrant our contempt.

By giving so much power to an enemy, we create legends.

We give them space in our minds,
letting them those things draw energy and life from us.

When our enemies become our focus,
they can obscure our path so we can't see the tree
for the proverbial mistletoe,
and then, surely, we lose site of the forest.

Walking through the woods,
we can always find mistletoe
growing atop oaks and pines and elms.

By viewing and loving mistletoe as part of creation,
we can honor it for what it is.

We can turn our backs to the path in front of us
and not be blind to all the amazing wonders and gifts of the woods.

Mistletoe reminds us that by loving each and every part of
creation, both the good and the bad,

we are able to keep walking down the sacred path of life.

In Christ, loving enemies is our saving grace.

In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount
given by Jesus on the plain,
there were wild flowers growing among the fields of grasses.
He was preaching to folks in an occupied nation that held
numerous powerful enemies.
But instead of focusing on their enemies—
those who sought to persecute them—
Jesus invited the crowd and his disciples to look around,
to consider the wild flowers and the birds of the air.
He told them to think of the sun shining on both good and evil.
Jesus was offering them a path to freedom by making them aware
of their place within God's creation.
He said to those gathered around him,
“but love your enemies, do good, and lend,
expecting nothing in return.
Your reward will be great,
and you will be children of the Most High;
for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.
Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.
Do not judge, and you will not be judged;
do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Forgive, and you will be forgiven;
give, and it will be given to you.
A good measure, pressed down, shaken together,
running over, will be put into your lap;
for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Jesus tells us there is a way out
from the trap of giving power to our enemies
and focusing on how we can free ourselves
from poisonous thoughts.
Instead, the Gospel invitation is
to try walking a path of non-judgmental love
that is blossoming with mercy and fruitful with gratitude.

This is the path through the woods, the wilderness,
where forgiveness and freedom are found.
Jesus message is that if we can love,
that is “will the good for” our enemies,
it will be our own saving grace.
By walking the path he is setting before us,
we can learn and grow
in understanding how God loves and forgives us.
If we can be radical enough in this world
to try forgiveness and mercy,
then we might find forgiveness and freedom for ourselves.
As Anne LaMott has written,
*To refuse to forgive is like drinking rat poison
and then waiting for the rat to die.*

Recently I have read about a community of women survivors
of trafficking, addiction, and violence.
Many of their stories witness to the miraculous truth of what Jesus
preaches to us in the gospel tonight.
From them, we can learn that forgiveness does not mean
you don't hold someone accountable,
nor does it mean you will escape the trauma of your experience.
It means there is a path through woods—the path less taken—
that can make all the difference in your own life
and the lives of others,
a path that is deep and beautiful but also difficult and even painful.
Some of the steps on that path are forgiveness and mercy
and not letting the enemy blind you
to the beauty and goodness of the world.
One woman who had forgiven her rapist and would-be-killer,
is now helping other survivors and has become
a nationally recognized resource for hope and healing
for trafficking victims.
She has launched many survival programs across the country.

You could say this woman had walked in the woods
beneath the mistletoe but she had not forgotten
to see the beauty of the entire forest.
She embraced her enemies
and became a preacher of the truth
of what Jesus promises about the blessings
of not returning evil for evil.

During the Rwandan genocide in the mid-nineties,
the entire family of a woman named Immaculee
was murdered in a massacre.
Immaculee chose to forgive the people behind the death
and went on to write a best selling book entitled,
“Left to Tell.”
She went on to create a Left to Tell Charitable Fund
in order to help children who have been orphaned
due to genocide.
Rwanda’s history was marred by tragic cultural genocide,
yet decades later healing and reconciliation have begun
throughout the country.
This is an important reminder of the power of forgiveness
to heal not only individuals but communities.

There are many examples of people choosing
to love their enemies through forgiveness.
They refuse to drink the poison of anger and resentment.
They choose a different path, a road not as well traveled as others.

Ultimately, through prayer and the help of the Spirit,
the victory to overcome our emotions belongs to Christ—
If we choose to follow him, we can learn that
forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it a tolerance of sin.
Forgiveness does not seek revenge or demand repayment.

Forgiveness means resolving to live with the consequences of another person's sin (after all, we all living with the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin).

We can choose to live with the consequences of sin in the bondage of bitterness or the freedom of forgiveness.

And, finally, we don't heal in order to forgive.

We forgive in order to heal.

Forgiveness is the antidote to the rat poison of hate and bitterness.

Where does all this leave us?

With a choice.

What mistletoes are we misjudging on our paths that prevent us from a way through the woods?

What do you and I still need to forgive so that whomever we might think of as our enemy no longer overcomes us?

What can you give or receive as a measure of the truth of our sinfulness (our need for forgiveness) and our holiness (our empowerment to offer forgiveness)?

Stand beneath the Cross.

Stand beneath the Cross

the place where steadfast love and faithfulness have met together; where righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Psalm 85)

Stand beneath the Cross and learn the truth about loving enemies.

Christ loved his friends and his enemies (and, really, sometimes it was hard to tell the difference).

And that is our saving grace.

It is the path to life.

May God give us all the grace to see how loving our enemies can truly be our saving grace here and now.