

## ***Holding Space for Transformation***

Installation Service for Billy Funk

Sermon by Eric Frey Martin

Matthew 5:43-48

September 11, 2022

*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor[i] and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

It is good to be here with you all this morning. As I look around the room, I see many familiar faces and feel a sense of kinship here at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship. It is an honor to be here with you today on this day in which you mark the installation of Billy Funk to your pastoral team. As an introduction, I am Eric Frey Martin, I live here in Goshen, I currently work at Mennonite Mission Network, and attend Silverwood Mennonite and have known Billy for 12 + years.

The first time I met Billy, he cried.

And as someone who is fairly uncomfortable with most expressions of emotion, I wasn't really sure what to do with that.

And besides that, it was job interview.

Billy had applied to be on summer camp staff at Camp Friedenswald where I was working at the time and I don't remember the exact conversation that led to tears, but I recall that it was focused around the question about the applicant's spiritual journey. As I have learned to know Billy since then, I am sure that the tears were caused by a real sense of tension, of struggling to hold in balance a faith of his youth with the new understandings around God that one often receives during their formative years at college. To that moment Billy brought his whole self, his whole vulnerable self and in doing so held space for transformation. In a job interview- when one is often coached to lead with confidence and certainty, Billy led with self-reflection and openness. As Billy has become one of my best friends, I know now that this was not a one-off event but that Billy always leads with curiosity, vulnerability, humility and seeking out the

other---characteristics that made him a great counselor, an even better friend, and no doubt a wonderful pastor.

To put a bow on that story- All we had heard about Billy up to that point was how fun he was and so we went into the interview looking for a little depth...so really, he nailed it.

Today's passage from Matthew 5:43-48, I believe we see Jesus asking the crowds to also hold a space for transformation. If you are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, you will know that there is a whole context to this passage. At the start of Chapter 5, we find Jesus speaking to crowds and he is saying some pretty radical stuff. Jesus' crowds were often made up of people who were not in the upper crust of society, but rather those who often were oppressed by the rich and powerful and so I can imagine that as people are listening to Jesus talk, they are getting pretty inspired and fired up. We can imagine them whispering to one another "Blessed are the poor"- that's me! "Blessed are those that mourn for they shall be comforted- that sounds good, I am liking this guy"

"You are the salt of the earth", "the light of the world" finally, someone is recognizing my value". The first shall be last and the last shall be first...oh yeah, here we go! Jesus even goes into these ways in which you can subvert the powerful and the oppressors a bit when he starts talking about turning the other cheek, giving your shirt and your coat, or going the extra mile. As in that context these strategies actually would have helped the person being oppressed take back power by forcing the oppressor to back off or to commit shameful acts. But that is another sermon.

And so perhaps it is not hard for us to imagine in this day and age, that for a moment the sermon on the mount almost becomes a political rally with people ready to respond to these radical notions by taking action. Perhaps some were ready to do what it takes to see this new vision where the last shall be first and the first shall be last-let's start putting people in their places.

But Jesus does a little turn here in verse 43, lest the crowd miss the point that Jesus is promoting non-violence in the verses leading up to this. And he suggests to the crowd, perhaps not so subtly. "Oh, those people you are thinking of right now, the ones who strike you on the cheek, and sue for shirt, and make you walk one mile with them simply because they have the power to do so. The ones who make you poor, and the ones who make you mourn...you know your enemies...you should love them too and pray for them.

Jesus---what a buzz kill. Imagine going to a political rally and walking away with more empathy for your opponent than when you entered. No thanks, I would rather hold on to the sense of superiority I get when we name all the ways in which they are wrong, and all the ways in which they are a clear and present threat to my way of being. I love to rage at the ways in which my

opponents have so corrupted society and sown exclusion, division, and hatred. The rage makes me feel good, it helps me know I am on the right side. In a confusing world, having someone who I can point to as exactly wrong is just the dopamine hit, I need to make it through the day.

And don't get me wrong, while I am saying this a bit facetiously, there is actually a lot to rage against in our world. Jesus rages too. Sermon on the Mount Jesus is also turning over tables Jesus that we see in Matthew 21 where Jesus rages so hard at the injustice of the temple tax system that he turns ransacks the money changer's set up.

So, when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he is not telling us to not be angry. He is not telling us to just let the powerful walk all over the oppressed, or to give a free pass to those who do wrong. Jesus is not asking us to go give a hug to the congress person who we disagree with the most, or take cookies to our neighbor with the hateful yard signs and flags.

Rather, Jesus is asking us to recognize a common theme that we see throughout the scriptures. That the well-being of ourselves and those we love, is caught up with the well-being of our neighbors and even our enemies. That the shalom, or the complete peace, not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of enoughness, the presence of justice- for that to be experienced, we must not just be willing to fight our enemies for it, but that actually we have to be willing to love our enemies for it.

Because indeed our peace, well-being and our salvation is caught up together with all people, including and maybe especially our enemies. Our visions of a hopeful future cannot just simply exclude those who think differently from us most practically because any vision of the future will have to include them too. And so, as Jesus is asking the crowd to love their enemies, he is simply recognizing the truth that if we hate our enemies, if we fight against them, if we exclude them from our dreams for the future then violence, hate, and division will always be our companions on that journey. However, if we are able to love them, not in a way that allows them to continue with abuse, and certainly not in a way that condones injustice or violence. But especially if those of us who are privileged enough to stay in the conversation without being wounded can keep the door open a crack, then we can hold the space for transformation and for liberating love to come through. For it is by love that we are liberated ourselves, and it will be by that same love that others are liberated as well.

There is tension here to be sure. There are hours of Sunday school class time to go through the caveats, exceptions, stipulations that are actually necessary and need to be covered when dealing with loving our enemy because it would not be fair to just say love your enemy and not recognize the real harm that enemies often cause. But this is precisely the tension that I think we are called into. The space between grace and justice. The space between our own certainties about what is right and what we are blind to. Throughout scripture God shows up

most vividly in the wilderness and it is in the wilderness of this tension, I believe, that we will most often find the transforming God.

Will we live in this space perfectly...no, of course not. But you may be saying, but the last verse of the passage that was read was "be perfect" as your father in heaven is perfect. Right, but when we say the word perfect in English, we almost use it in the negative sense of without error or blemish. But the Greek word being used here is perhaps better translated to be complete. Be complete, as God is complete. Be complete as God who encompasses and created everything is complete. Be complete by understanding that all you see and understand is part of something larger. Be complete in recognizing that denying your enemy means denying a part of yourself as well. Be complete by allowing space for even more to enter in.

And so we attempt to love our enemies not just out of some moral obligation, or because our Mennonite pacifism demands it, but because we recognize that if we don't we limit ourselves and if we fail to hold space for transformation, it is also our own transformation that we are denying.

Now, one could be asking-- is this a good passage for an installation service?...I don't know. I hope you don't see Billy as your enemy and Billy I hope you don't see Berkey as your enemy...I don't think that is the dynamic here. However, the reason this was passage was well chosen by Billy is because the tension that is present in this passage. The difficulty, the refusal of a clear and easy answer is the space where I have found that Billy lives.

Billy comes to you with an array of occupations under his belt. Since I have known Billy, I have seen him be a camp counselor, an actor, an athlete, a track coach, a Jimmy John's bike delivery person, a youth leader, a waiter at the Wrigley Field roof-tops and a waiter at some high-class restaurant who's name I forget. I have seen him be an improv-artist, a seminary student, a tap dancer, a pastoral intern, a construction worker and probably several things I am forgetting. The reason I bring this up is not because of all the skills that Billy brings to this job but because of all the relationships that he brings. Through all of these spaces Billy has gained the friendship and trust of people in each. And I know from being his friend and the phone calls I have gotten needing to unpack conversations that he had with his co-workers that not all of those relationships have been easy. I know that some co-workers have espoused ideas that have been reprehensible to Billy, or have pushed Billy in what he believes. Instead of just writing these people off, Billy has been one to engage deeper. To ask the questions like "why do you think that way?" "What makes this person the way they are?" "What perspectives are they bringing that I don't have?" "What can I learn from them?" And in doing so Billy, you have resisted the easy way of cutting these people out of your life and making them an enemy and have chosen instead to hold space for transformation- theirs and your own.

Billy- to this church and to these people you bring the fullness of yourself. You bring the parts of you that are obvious to yourself and others and you bring the parts that are that still locked away-waiting to be discovered. You bring those parts too. And Berkey, you bring the fullness of yourselves, both the obvious parts and all the dormant potential. As you engage together in ministry, your roles towards each other will not just be Billy as pastor giving, and you the congregation receiving but it will be in together holding space for each other and all who enter into relationship with you to be liberated in a way that unlocks your potentials and keeps adding the completeness that mirrors our God. May you find that as you love one another, that love is not a scarce resource but one that is exponential and so that the love that you share here together will hold you in the spaces of tension and allow you to love all of those around you, including your enemies. And in a world such as ours, that's the kind of love we need.

Berkey Avenue and Billy- I bless you as you begin this journey together. May the spaces you hold be filled with love and joy, may they be filled with grace and justice, may they be filled with unending transformation.

Amen.