

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. *Amen.*

Have you ever been in an argument that ended with someone saying to you “I hate you?” Worse yet, with you saying that to someone else? Those are hurtful words, especially when used by children against their parents, or friends who disagree, or lovers who can’t find a more effective way to express their anger and disappointment. In those situations, “I hate you” are words of emotion, often not meant, especially outside of that moment, and in the best scenarios they’re followed by apologies and forgiveness.

Hate is a strong word, and as we grow older most of us learn that its power is evil. Yet we still use it to express our dislike for a thing, a situation or a behavior. For example, we often hear Christians say “love the sinner, hate the sin,” words that were *not* spoken by Jesus and don’t come from any passage of scripture. The phrase is believed to have originated with St. Augustine in a letter advising nuns to have a “love for mankind and hatred of sins.” For most of us, it’s difficult—if not impossible—to separate the sin from the person who commits it. And saying those words, “love the sinner, hate the sin,” gives us a kind of religious permission to hate. Even if Jesus *had* said those words, I don’t believe he would have meant them in the way we use them.

Merriam-Webster defines hate as intense hostility and aversion usually deriving from fear, anger, or sense of injury. Often it grows from intimidation and a lack of understanding. Whatever its source, it has the power to do immense damage, not only to those who are the targets of it, but also to those who practice it. In those cases, we might not *hear* the word hate because instead of being spoken it’s acted out. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that there are currently 892 active hate groups in the United States, noting that “All hate groups have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics;” that is, characteristics which they do not have the ability to change, such as race, gender, and sexuality. The activities of these hate groups can include criminal acts, marches, rallies, speeches, meetings, leafleting or publishing, often violent. These folks are organized and operate without compunction. There are twenty-nine hate groups operating in North Carolina. As Christians, we should be both horrified and terrified. Hate for another person or a group of persons directly contradicts Christian ideals and principles, as today’s lessons make clear.

Our lesson from Acts affirms Peter’s call to serve as the Apostle to the Gentiles. All through the Gospels, we’ve heard bits and pieces of the struggles between faithful Jews who chose to follow Jesus and these savage, heathen Gentiles who are interested in his message and drawn to follow him, but who are unacceptable to other Christ followers because they don’t practice or believe in the ancient purity codes. In Peter’s vision he’s told to kill and eat those very animals he’s been forbidden to eat for his entire life. It’s hard, of course, to overcome a mindset that is ingrained not only in your faith, but in one’s very being. Peter’s upbringing has formed him to understand that if he eats these animals or disobeys any of the laws and practices that are central to his faith, God will be offended and Peter will risk repercussion and divine punishment. But now he hears this voice saying that things have changed and he must change also. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” “Do not make a distinction between them and us.”

Without God, everybody in this story would be at a disadvantage here. The circumcised believers, those who had paid their initiation dues, likely felt their qualifications for acceptance and belonging were diminished if the same criteria didn’t apply to everyone. The Gentiles would never be able to “catch up” with them even if they did submit to being circumcised. Peter was right in the middle. He must have had to dig deep into the core of his being—first to accept what was being presented to him; and then to be the presenter himself, mediator, leader of this God-driven move to level the field. We can imagine he spent lots of time in prayer before he was able to say “If then God gave

them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" It's a good question for everyone who comes after Peter. Who are we who could hinder God?

Through the years many have tried, often for what seemed to be righteous, valid reasons, purposes believed to represent God's will and to benefit God's kingdom. We haven't been able to learn the lessons, it seems, and continue to be more concerned about what others are doing and saying than we are about ourselves and what *we* are doing and saying. In his blog "Stuff that Needs to be Said," John Pavlovitz wrote this week that so much of our modern spiritual experience runs on negativity that negativity becomes the core value. Writing specifically about Christians' use of social media, he says "Take a look around. Remove the anger from many Christians' social media expression of faith and you'll often find there isn't a whole lot left." He continues, "Ironically the more commonplace controversy becomes in our public faith discourse, the less interesting Jesus seems to become to us and yet the more necessary he is."

It isn't only Jesus and his saving grace that becomes more and more necessary to us, to our culture, to our relationships with those we know and love and those we're not quite sure about. What is also necessary, *imperative* if we are to change the course of our world, is our obedience to our Lord's commandment to love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." These words come from John's "Farewell Discourse," advice Jesus is giving the disciples before he leaves them. It's a lesson we must be taught continually because we have a hard time "getting it." We don't hear Jesus say to love only the ones who think like us, who look like us, who act like us." Fulfilling his command wasn't easy for the early Christians, and it's not any easier for us. It goes against our human nature to "love" people whose core values and beliefs are different from our own. We have a hard enough time loving people like us! But Jesus tells us over and over and over again to love one another and our faithful response is to obey him.

St. Francis de Sales, one of the leaders of the Counter-Reformation in the late 16th century and early 17th century, was known for his spirit of charity and reconciliation. He was once approached by a disciple who said to him, "Sir, you speak so much about the love of God, but you never tell us how to achieve it. Won't you tell me how one comes to love God?"

St. Francis replied, "There is only one way and that is to love Him."

"But you don't understand my question," the disciple said. "What I asked was, "How do you engender this love of God?"

And St. Francis said, "By loving Him."

Once again the pupil came back with the same question. "But what steps do you take? Just what do you do in order to come into the possession of this love?"

And all St. Francis said was, "You begin by loving and you go on loving and loving teaches you how to love. And the more you love, the more you learn to love."

I suppose we could say the same about hate. The more we hate, the more we learn to hate. Love and hate are so different yet so similar in the ways we learn and practice them: both are emotions, coming from the heart; both can be learned; both grow through words and actions, through attention and practice. We may not think they involve choices, but they do. We choose to seek the good or to focus on the bad. And if we listen for God's voice and let ourselves be guided by God's Holy Spirit, we, like Peter, will choose the New Covenant. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." "Do not make a distinction between them and us."

God of power and might: come and make all things new. *Amen.*