Exodus 3:1-15

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

Does everyone know what a concordance is? I’m sure you do but just to state the obvious, a concordance is a record of every word in the Bible. It’s an index. Nowadays they’re online and super easy to use. Let’s say you’re interested in today’s first reading, about Moses and the burning bush. And you wonder how often and where in the Bible Moses is mentioned. Go to a concordance site, type in the word “Moses,” and you get all the passages in which he can be found.

Let’s say you’re interested in love. Well, who isn’t? Love is mentioned 731 times in the Bible. That’s a lot. Seven-hundred and change. And that’s great. It is as it should be because love is what we’re all about. It’s what God is all about. Better said, love is what God is.

But when we talk about love, we often fail to talk about something else. We don’t talk about the elephant in the room. Do you know what it is? It’s hate! Of course. We think of hate as being the opposite of love. Some say that’s incorrect. That apathy or not caring is the opposite of love: apathy being the absence or negation of love. I’ll leave that to you and your dinner table conversations this week. In the meantime, we’re gonna talk about that elephant in the room.

The 20th century mystic Thomas Merton has a chapter in his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, called “Hell as Hatred.” In that chapter he says, **“Hell is where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves.”**

Thank you, Thomas Merton. I am grateful that a spiritual giant of his stature admits that we humans hate. And if it is part of the human condition, it is part of us, the good and faithful ones who worship every week. But notice, Merton is suggesting that when we hate, the real object of our hatred is ourselves. That’s a tough nut to swallow, because hating seems so objectified. In other words, when I hate, it is something – or someone – out there. It is an object. Certainly it’s not me! But that’s exactly what Merton is trying to say.

He continues his story of hell: **“They are all thrown together in their fire and each one tries to thrust the others away with a huge hatred. The reason they want to be free of one another is not so much that they hate what they see in others, as that they know others hate what can be seen in them. All recognize in one another what they detest in themselves: selfishness and impotence, agony, terror and despair.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

“All recognize in one another what they detest in themselves.” All hate one another because of what they hate in themselves. The real object of our hating is ourselves. That’s why Jesus says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you hate your neighbor there must be some self-loathing going on inside and spilling out to others. And that’s why we say in our mission statement that we inspire love of God, creation, **self** and others. There is no love of others before love of self, which isn’t a matter of inflated ego, or pride or vanity. It is a matter of self-acceptance.

Before I read this book of Merton’s – again it’s *New Seeds of Contemplation* – I had never seen any Christian author address the subject of hate. It is the elephant, even among authors and thinkers. And yet the Bible in its wisdom acknowledges hatred as a human capacity. If you check your concordance, you will find almost two-hundred mentions of the word “hate.”

One of those references is in today’s reading from Romans. “Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.” This passage puts hating in a positive light, as if to harness a human reality from our dark side, or shadow side, to good purposes. It is the way Proverbs imagines that God might hate. A small chunk of the sixth chapter of Proverbs says:

There are six things that the Lord hates,

seven that are an abomination to him:

haughty eyes, a lying tongue,

and hands that shed innocent blood,

a heart that devises wicked plans,

feet that hurry to run to evil,

a lying witness who testifies falsely,

and one who sows discord in a family.

I guess you could call this “righteous hatred.” Sort of like “righteous indignation” or “holy anger,” as when Jesus became violent towards the money-changers doing business in the temple.

But what about unrighteous hatred? We don’t think we hate. It’s such a strong word. It’s too dark and violent. We minimize and even sanitize our darker impulses and deny having them. Maybe we’ll allow that we dislike someone or don’t approve of some group. If we’re a little bit more honest, we’ll say we flat-out just don’t get along with another because our personalities are so different. And that may be true.

And it is praiseworthy when we speak – and think – well of those we dislike or disdain. It is more than praiseworthy. It is spiritually mature and a model of emotional restraint. Just be sure you’re not sanitizing your image of yourself just because you know it’s wrong to hate. Drill down. What’s beneath that disapproval, that disdain, that thing that people do on Facebook: “I unfriend you!” Maybe it’s not full-blown hatred – it’s probably not. But be honest with yourself. This can be terribly humbling. And cleansing.

We want to love; we want to nurture loving attitudes. But love should not come at the cost of deception. Because once we become practiced in self-deception, we begin to lose our mooring. To deceive one’s self is to keep secrets, from self and others. These secrets build the false self, that phony, inauthentic projection of who I am. The bigger the gap between who I project myself to be, and who I really am, the greater is the amount of unhappiness in my life. And neurosis. Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying: “You are only as sick as your secrets.” That’s why their first step to sanity is to admit. Accept. Quit pretending you don’t have a drinking problem.

We need to stop pretending that we are innocent lambs when it comes to hating. There is a remarkable little help right there in this verse from Romans: “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” The helpful hint comes in the form of opposition – something we all know a lot about.

Opposition is a biological reality. When you inhale, the next thing you do is exhale. You can’t do them at the same time. But you can do both of them. And you can’t do one without the other. They are in opposition. Inhale/exhale. When I open my arm, I extend the bicep muscle. When I close it, I contract. Extend/contract. Inhale/exhale. These are opposites.

Opposition is also an emotional reality. It operates in our psyches. When I love, I cannot hate at the same time. When the text says **hold fast** to what is good, it is said in opposition to **hate**: hate what is evil. So the little hint about how to deal with hatred is the opposite of holding on to. It is **letting go**. Let go of what you hate.

It makes perfect sense. Let it go. Let go of what bothers you, annoys you, of what and whom you hate. In order to do this, you first have to admit there is something – or someone – you hate. That starts to peel away the self-deception and leads to self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance is letting go of all those things you despise about yourself. Your bad habits; failures; inadequacies; short-comings. Self-acceptance is letting go. Let go of hatred; hold fast to what is good. If you want to accept yourself and love yourself, let go of your self-criticism. Find another hobby!

This letting go is hard work. Just like dieting. I was always a skinny kid. So much so that when I came home from school, my mom fed me chocolate milkshakes and potato chips. She was desperate to get weight on me. Isn’t a problem now. In the last number of years, I have learned that dieting requires my focused attention and energy. It does not happen on its own. This is a great analogy to the spiritual life.

The spiritual life, the life of faith takes attention and effort. But the benefits – life-long – of this work collect inside you. The benefits of self-acceptance, self-honesty, and honest love for others, for God, puddle up inside you and eventually spill out into the world.

Thomas Merton says it best when he says, “If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things in yourself, not in another.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Then, let go of these things; don’t deny that they exist inside you but don’t nurture them. Two dogs are fighting in your backyard: a white one and a black one. They will always be in your backyard. They will always be fighting. Which one wins? The one you feed.

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation,* (New Directions Publishing, New York), 1961, p.123. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p.122 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)