

Sermon by pastor Rainer Kiefer, OLKR

Hannover International Worship –

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The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters,

The biblical reading for today's sermon is from the Gospel Story as told by Matthew, chapter 5, 38-48: We have just listened to the reading, you've got copies of the text.

Text:

You all know that it is said: You shall love those whom you are close to, and hate those who are your enemies. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Overall, this is a very impressive text that many of us will know and that will always make us listen attentively – Jesus' program to overcome enmity and maybe also a program to overcome violence.

It is very much possible that the origin of these words goes all the way back to the historic Jesus; they are a crucial part of his teaching.

It is an impressive text because it is very different from everything we know and from what we consider feasible and right in our every day life. But it is also a text that disturbs and maybe even irritates us because it is so radical and because it expects so much of us.

You also know that it is said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But what I am saying to you is this: offer no resistance to one who does you evil.

Should a man strike you on the right cheek, turn towards him and offer him the other cheek as well. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your jacket as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile with him or her, go also the second mile.

Brothers and sisters, is this really good advice? How is that possible? And where will it end?

I often think of that man at the suburban railway station in Munich who, two years ago, spontaneously stepped in as two teenagers attacked a group of children. The two teenagers then turned towards him instead - and kicked and beat him violently, killing him eventually.

I am sure you read about this in the newspaper and followed it up on TV. Unfortunately this is not the only incident in recent years and there are other examples I could refer to.

Would it have been better if that man had not stepped in? And why did the other people waiting at the railway station not intervene? Why could they not restrain the wrongdoers and save the man's life?

How can we try to understand the text while we can think of so many examples in daily life to prove the opposite? How can we come to terms despite these mental reservations.

So again I went through the text - phrase by phrase - and asked myself which words I could endorse easily and without hesitation.

I'd like to draw your attention to v. 45.

It says, God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on everybody, whether they glorify or despise him.

Words which teach us humility!

Yes, we are living by grace, our life is a gift from God. We here on earth – fortunately – do not have a clear distinction between good and evil and the biblical image of humankind takes into consideration how much we all are struggling with light and shadow. And we as Protestants in particular know what it means to always be a sinner, justified and loved at the same time. We are loved – this is the good news. This might encourage us to move forward and to try to reach out for others who might need our attention and our care - even though they are not close to us yet.

So it seems right to ask:

How can you expect a reward from God if you always only love those that love you?

All lovers know how important it is to be able to forgive each other again and again, to start anew. Love that always counts up the amount of

attention or the intensity of feelings will hardly grow...

And Jesus said: "And what is so special about it if you are only kind to your brothers (and sisters)? This is something that people who do not know God do as well."

Anybody who is a member of a parish and works closely with others in the name of Christ will share this experience. I am sure there are always moments for all of us when it is not easy to be kind to the sisters and brothers. But this is exactly what is characteristic of a Christian community: that people commit themselves to one another, that they assume responsibility for one another and that in the light of the love of God, they see brothers and sisters in one another and accept one another as such.

You all know that it is said: You shall love those whom you are close to, and hate those who are

your enemies. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

The new ethics that Jesus presents in his Sermon on the Mount require a different logic, it presupposes that an action other than the expected action surprises the counterpart - and yes, also the opponent, the enemy.

Because you look at it with new eyes, an old story can sometimes be told in a new way, further escalation can be prevented and the old thought pattern of friend and foe be broken up.

Michael Klatt attended the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica as a delegate a few weeks ago and might be able to tell stories from all around the world and give examples of good practices to overcome the old pattern of love and hate in order to overcome violence. Maybe we shall later have a chance to listen to some of these stories.

I think of the civil rights movement in the United States of America in the 60s and of Martin Luther King who argued the same way.

“Let us try to see in the other not first and foremost the black brother or the white enemy, but let us look at each other as the children of the one father.

This sounds naive and with regard to the whole history of the civil rights movement, I guess, I am also simplifying things a bit.

But we all know that Martin Luther King’s words were important for black and for white Americans and he certainly deserves a place in the history-books of his country.

His acting in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount changed a whole country for the better – though at a high price.

Not long ago, I watched an excerpt of a film from that time again. It was an election campaign event of the presidential candidate Robert Kennedy on the evening of Martin Luther King's assassination. Robert Kennedy that evening honored the assassinated civil rights activist and at the same time tried to calm the angry masses which had gathered.

He succeeded by speaking sincerely about the fact that also one of his family members had been assassinated as well a few years before – his brother John F. Kennedy.

He explained how difficult it was for him and for his family to deal with the grief and the anger, but that it was vital to overcome the enmity among people.

It is that other logic, dear friends, that can break the vicious circle of violence. But for this, we need people that will follow this path in the spirit of Jesus Christ and following his example, thus bring

about change. Let us pray that with the help of God we might be empowered to live this other logic and give peace a chance.

A few days ago we had an ecumenical gathering in Geneva and church-representatives from Eastern Europe reflected on the history of the cold war and the challenges for the east-European churches in those days. We were also thinking of the peaceful revolution in the former German Democratic Republic 22 years ago. I guess, we all still have the pictures in our minds.

The worship services in the big churches, the people holding candles in their hands, protesters on the street and the call: no violence!

This story would also deserve more time. But today, I want to say only this:
Without Jesus' concept of not regarding people as enemies anymore, without the Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount, without courageous

Christians inside the churches and outside saying and doing the necessary, those days in the fall of 1989 could have ended differently.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

At the end of our service, dear brothers and sisters, we will say the Lord's Prayer together, asking God to forgive us our debts, as we also want to forgive our debtors.

This for a start - a new beginning.

In the name of Jesus let us begin with ourselves, practising a new, a different logic. So that it may also be true for us: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Amen