

Sermon on 1. John 4,7-12

“Beloved”, what a strange greeting for a modern-day congregation that is! So old fashioned, so far removed from the world we find ourselves in. But let me share a picture with you that might explain this strange greeting: it was at the 125th jubilee of the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Pretoria that I attended last year. The congregation has a very complicated past: it was established by German missionaries, it was deeply marred by the rift of the racism during the apartheid years, yet after the peaceful revolution of 1990 it was reformed – to bridge the gaps in culture, language, faith traditions. Three different language groups worship under one roof: German, Afrikaans and English – the latter including members of Tswana, Venda and Zulu traditions. Now in order to address this diverse church and its history at the jubilee service Bishop Müller got up to the pulpit, looked around and said with a broad smile: “You are such a wonderful crowd! Please forgive me for doing something which I have never done before delivering a message – I just have to take a picture of you wonderful people” – and out of his robe he whipped a camera and snapped a picture of us all. Later on he sent it to me: it shows a truly surprised crowd of worshippers, all smiling back at him, mirroring his attitude, in all shades and colors – a great snapshot indeed. A certain spirit of grace emanates from this picture which still warms my heart every time I think of it.

A similar warmth greets me when I read the passage of 1. John 4 which is the prescribed sermon text for this Sunday. It starts with the first word “Beloved”. “Beloved”, it says, mind you, not mere “friends”, as the NIV (and even some German translations) have it. “Beloved” – this sets the tone in a situation not unlike the one of St. Peters in Pretoria. For the original readers of the first letter of John had to address serious problems of division in their church – on the one side of the divide there were those who believed that the word of God was leading believers to separate from the world, and on the other side there were those who believed that the word of God meant to become involved in the world. “The Love of God is our first commandment”, the Gnostics, followers of a docetic reading of scripture, shouted from one side. “The love of neighbor is what we truly need”, believers of an incarnational reading of the Gospel shouted from the other side. Or to put it more bluntly: “Stay out of the mess”, one party demanded; “Get your hands dirty”, the other retorted.

As far as I am concerned this is quite a relevant discussion in the current crisis in Germany we find ourselves in – between those who clearly advocate the separation of Church and State, and those who advocate a prophetic voice of the Church in society, especially when it comes to the question of the State’s and the Churches’ response to flight, asylum and integration of refugees. Or when people demand that human rights are curtailed, borders be closed and walls be re-erected.

“Beloved”, the author of 1. John begins, and with this word he crosses the divide, like a good bridge builder should. For behind the Greek term for beloved “agaptoi” stands “agape” – “love” which is much more than one single word. In fact, it encompasses the entire story of

God and the world he created. It is a story of highest creativity, deepest passion and most intense presence.

In his 1967 “Levels of Love” sermon Dr. Martin Luther King explained the centrality of agape to his theology and philosophy of nonviolent social change. He said: “Agape is more than romantic love, it is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all men. Agape is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level, you love all men not because you like them, not because their ways appeal to you, but you love them because God loves them. “

Our own measures and definitions of love are no match of God’s love, King explained. Our love is too fickle to overcome divisions between human beings. It is too weak to match the hatred that is poured out against us by the distrust of competitors and the animosity of enemies. Only the compassionate and all-encompassing love of God can do this. As the central verses 10 and 11 in today’s sermon text point out: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dearly beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

It all starts out with God’s love. Without it we cannot do anything. But it does not end there. When we contemplate God’s love, when we experience it, we are liberated by it, and we are empowered to love others. For God himself has made that connection: he has bound love towards him and towards others together. He has created us human beings in his image, so that wherever we find people in need of his love, we meet him in them. As verse 12 of our text says: “No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” Or as the catholic theologian Paul Zulehner has it: “Whoever takes a dive into God, must surface in human beings.” God’s amazing and overflowing love, his desire to heal, must go further than us. His passionate love must come to fruition and completion in the least, the wounded, the other.

The Gospel text of this morning makes this connection very clear. When the expert of the law wants to know how to attain eternal life, Jesus cites the two-fold commandment of love and adds: “Do this, and you shall live”. Very blunt, I’d say. Just do it! And you shall experience God. Yet the lawyer tries to argue, his want a legal definition that sets limits. In turn, Jesus does nothing like that. Instead, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan who is not concerned with rules of faith and dogma, limits and regulations: he just does what needs to be done, and even more. Not only does he give first aid to the victim, he looks after his transport and care; he even pays the fee to secure time for recovery. “This is God’s way of undeserved, unconditional love”, Jesus seems to say to the lawyer. “Where you want to set limits, he sets an example. Where you want to erect walls, he builds bridges”.

I was inspired by the story of a village Sumte in the Lüneburger Heide. 102 inhabitants suddenly had to put up 750 refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in their small and quiet village: more than 7 refugees a head. The NY Times and Al-Jazeera sent journalists. “A

catastrophe in the making”, many papers predicted, but after a busy six months they rubbed their eyes in amazement: mayor Grit Richter, 53, rose to the challenge, organised a team of co-workers, and got the work going. “None of the many fears that were raised materialised”, she says, “because we took them seriously. When people argued that the sewerage net would break down, we got more pipes. When they said, telecommunication would fail, we got new connections. The police stationed was beefed up, we got new lights along the streets.” And now, after most of the refugees went on to their final destination in different towns in the region, the people in charge were a little sad to see them go. “At first people didn’t know how to deal with it. We’re just not prepared for it. But in the end all worked out. Artisans, bakers, the supermarkets, lots of jobs were created – the whole of Sumte profited. And even more – many of the villagers found new friends, founded a continuing network”.

But what if it doesn’t work out? What if fears become true – like in Cologne, and hatred ensues – like in Heidenau, Trömnitz and many other places, where refugees are attacked, houses burnt and supporters threatened?

Again, that’s nothing new. According to Dr. King’s sermon of 1967 agape love is not romantic, not even about friendship, but goes beyond that. Therefore in his sermon King went on: “This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your enemies.” And I’m happy that he didn’t say, “Like you enemies,” because there are some people that I find it pretty difficult to like. Liking is an affectionate emotion, and I can’t like anybody who would bomb my home. I can’t like anybody who would exploit me. I can’t like anybody who would trample over me with injustices. I can’t like them. I can’t like anybody who threatens to kill me day in and day out. But Jesus reminds us that love is greater than liking. Love is understanding, creative, redemptive good will toward all men.

I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate it too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force.” In recent weeks I received a very good, though not widely publicized news: the small town of Bad Nenndorf, a target of the extreme right for their yearly staging of hate speech and neo-nazi propaganda, had reason to rejoice: for the first time the right wingers did not master their march; the collective resistance of the citizens networks, the churches, the synagogue and union representatives had stood their ground. It took soul force, creativity and lots of persistent courage to achieve that. To me this is a very helpful, while sobering thought. Love of God and neighbor are not dependent on our emotion, right atmosphere and circumstances. But life is not all chandeliers and soft warm feelings. It is often very exhausting, painful and disturbing. And yet, while all this is true, it is even more exhilarating, wonderful and amazing. And this is precisely BECAUSE love does not start with us and our measures, definitions and limitations, but with God. Amen.

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